

Toward a More Anatomically Complete Model of Literacy Instruction: A Focus on African American Male Adolescents and Texts¹

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In this article, Alfred Tatum argues that the current framing of the adolescent literacy crisis fails to take into account the in-school and out-of-school challenges confronting many African American male adolescents today, particularly those growing up in high-poverty communities. Using the metaphor of literacy instruction as a human body, he argues that in the absence of sound theory about the importance of texts for African American male adolescents, even the best instructional methods will fall flat, like a body without a head. He offers a more anatomically complete model in which instructional methods are governed by theories about how literacy can help young men of color respond to their immediate contexts, and in which professional development gives legs to these methods by preparing teachers to engage all students. Finally, in a case study of one Chicago youth, Tatum illustrates both the power that relevant texts can hold for young men of color and the missed opportunities that result when students do not encounter such texts in their schools.

According to many standardized assessments, educators in the U.S. continually fail to advance the literacy development and academic achievement of African American male adolescents, particularly the ones who live and go to schools in high-poverty communities. There is an absence of interdisciplinary depth, theoretical grounding, and focus on responsive pedagogy required to provide effective literacy instruction for these young men. For example, when policymakers plan literacy reforms, they often do not consider research on resilience (Henderson & Milstein, 2003; Werner & Smith, 1992), life outcome perspectives (Mizell, 1999), the relationship between masculinity and schooling (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Young, 2000), the relationship between neighborhood quality and schooling (Ceballo, McLoyd, & Toyokawa, 2004), and how social processes of race, class, and gender are interwoven with literacy (Greene & Abt-Perkins, 2003; Lesko, 2000; Swanson, Cunningham, & Spencer, 2003). In efforts to reverse trends of poor reading outcomes among this group, the multiple in-school and out-of-school contexts that African American male adolescents have to negotiate are often ignored when developing or adopting instructional plans, selecting curricula, or examining students' placement in low-level or remedial courses.

¹ This article was originally published in the Spring 2008 Harvard Educational Review. This is not the complete article.

My experience over the past fourteen years as a teacher, researcher, and professional developer in middle and high schools leads me to assert that many school leaders are not openly and critically discussing issues of race, language, gender, social class, and adolescent literacy. Discussion of race and social class creates tension in schools, and is often devoid of the critical analysis such a dialogue deserves. I am often asked to explain why I feel the need to write about African American adolescent males when the data are clear about their dismal reading achievement and the deleterious outcomes these young men experience in school and society. It is because there is an urgent need to address both the literacy needs and life outcomes of African American male adolescents in order to improve the conditions of these young men in school and society. It has become perfunctory to describe African American males using high school dropout, incarceration, and unemployment statistics, without also providing the necessary careful analysis done by social scientists and educators to unearth the root causes of these outcomes (Roderick, 1994). Questions related to educational malfeasance toward poor adolescents, particularly African American males, are not asked, and our educational discourse suffers as a result.

In this article, I describe the need for a more anatomically complete model of literacy instruction for African American male adolescents. After describing the model, I explain how the adolescent literacy crisis and its framing can potentially interrupt the implementation of such a model for young men of color. The last section of the article focuses on a qualitative case study with a sixteen-year-old African American male and highlights the centrality of meaningful texts to any literacy model that aims to advance the literacy development of African American male adolescents.

By expressly focusing on African American males in this article, I do not intend to undermine the significance of addressing the literacy needs of *all* adolescents in the United States, where an adolescent literacy crisis has been identified (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006). A false polarization is often evoked when efforts are aimed specifically to address the literacy needs of African American male adolescents. It is often intimated that a concentrated focus on African American males suggests that the literacy needs of African American adolescent girls or other adolescents are less important or do not require the same attention. This is simply not the case. It is the case, however, that literacy reform efforts aimed at improving African American male adolescents' reading achievement and life outcomes have been woefully inadequate and have underestimated the depth of their literacy needs in both racially segregated and racially integrated schools. Therefore, I have been working for the past eight years to develop a model for advancing the literacy development of African American male adolescents. Though the model is theoretically grounded in the literacy needs of these young men, it does not exclude other populations and may even be useful in promoting the literacy development of all students.

My work began as an eighth-grade social studies teacher on Chicago's South Side, working with struggling adolescent readers. In trying to improve their reading achievement, I was confronted with myriad challenges, including students' accumulation of failure, poor concepts of reading, and lack of self-efficacy stemming from years of ineffective instruction. Offsetting the resistance toward reading among my African American male students was particularly challenging. Four of the eighth-grade boys I taught during my third year of teaching simply refused to read. I began to engage their voices as a teacher-researcher to find ways to break down the barriers that

disenfranchised these boys, who had been assigned to a low-level reading track (Tatum, 2000). Over time, I realized that the four major barriers to their engagement with reading were the fear of being publicly embarrassed if they failed in front of their peers, their limited vocabulary knowledge, the lack of attention their former teachers placed on reading books and engaging with texts, and their perceptions that teachers expected them to fail.

Since that time, I have conducted two qualitative case studies exploring the root causes of reluctance among some African American male adolescents. The first was a case study of a professional development initiative aimed at identifying the aspects of professional development that teachers found most useful for advancing the literacy development of seventh- and eighth-grade African American students (Tatum, 2002, 2003). The second was a case study of an African American teenage male, in which I sought to identify texts and textual characteristics he found effective for becoming a better reader and shaping his own identity (Tatum, in press). Some aspects of the latter study are described in this article. Currently, I am in my nineteenth month of working to help close the reading achievement gap in a large, racially integrated high school where the African American males are among the lowest-performing readers and have not made Adequate Yearly Progress under No Child Left Behind in the past five years. Additionally, my own status as an African American male who was educated in several of Chicago's inner-city schools in high-poverty neighborhoods, and who later became a teacher and reading specialist in similar communities, informs the call I make to move toward a more anatomically complete model of literacy instruction for adolescents (Tatum, 2003, 2005).

The more anatomically complete model of literacy instruction that I propose integrates effective instructional practices informed by the extant reading research on adolescent literacy (Alvermann, Hinchman, Moore, Phelps, & Waff, 2006; Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Jetton & Dole, 2004; Rush, Eakle, & Berger, 2007), by research on African American males (Fashola, 2005; Polite & Davis, 1999), and by research on boys and literacy (Brozo, 2002; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). My model also gives attention to multiple conceptualizations of literacies and identities, some of which are situated within power structures such as class, gender, and race (Collins & Blot, 2003; Street, 1995). Finally, it aims to support teachers in structuring their students' day-to-day activities in a way that maximizes their engagement with meaningful, relevant texts.

As displayed in [Figure 1](#), the model I am advancing has multiple theoretical, instructional, and professional development strands. *Theoretical strands* constitute the head of the model and focus on defining the role of literacy instruction for adolescents in their present-day contexts, creating curriculum orientations that empower them, and using a culturally responsive approach to literacy teaching. Each of these strands is glaringly omitted in many school literacy reform efforts. The *instructional strands* comprise the body of the model and focus on research-based reading practices. The *professional development strands* serve as the legs of the model and focus on in-school teacher professional development and teacher preparation.

At present, most literacy reform efforts focus primarily on the instructional strands (body), and thus constitute what I refer to as an anatomically *incomplete* model of literacy instruction. For example, Chicago Public Schools, the third-largest school district in the United States, uses a literacy reform framework that focuses primarily on word study, fluency, comprehension, and

writing. Yet according to recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data, only 17 percent of Chicago’s eighth-grade students scored at a proficient level in reading, performing better than only three large urban districts in the United States. While reading strategies offer much-needed support for struggling adolescent readers (Heller & Greenleaf, 2007), the corpus of these strategies aimed at improving the reading achievement of African American adolescent males remains insufficient.

Many teachers who have a strong foundational knowledge for teaching reading still experience difficulty teaching African American male adolescents who attend schools in high-poverty communities. During an e-mail exchange, a veteran educator informed me that she had more than twenty-five years of experience teaching reading strategies but found she was ineffective with the African American ninth-grade males in her classes. She acknowledged that she did not have sufficient competence with other components of literacy instruction, which I refer to here as “vital signs,” that could contribute to her effectiveness with African American male adolescents.

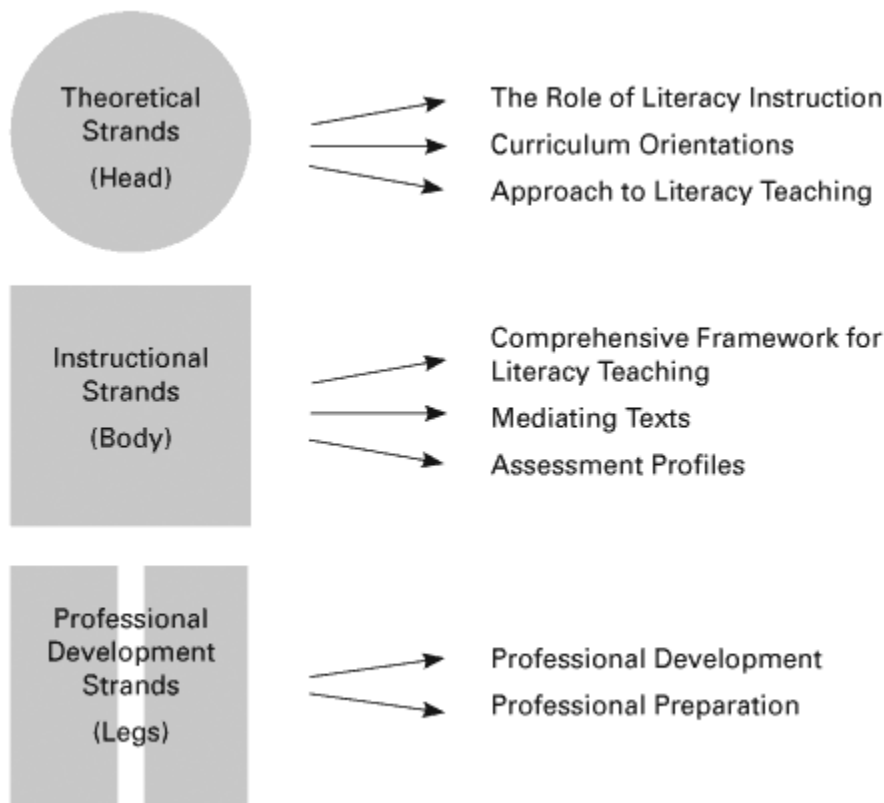


FIGURE 1 A More Anatomically Complete Model of Literacy Instruction

Multiple Vital Signs of Literacy Instruction

A more anatomically complete model of literacy instruction pays attention to four categories of literacy vital signs — vital signs of *reading*, vital signs of *readers*, vital signs of *reading instruction*, and vital signs of *educators* — all essential elements for improving students' reading achievement. The vital signs refer to aspects of instruction that should be cultivated in classrooms and tailored to the characteristics of educators and students. As shown in Table 1, the vital signs categories correspond to four parallel gaps affecting students' literacy-related outcomes: a reading achievement gap, a relationship gap, a rigor gap, and a responsiveness gap.

The vital signs of *reading* provide the necessary working tools (e.g., decoding, self-questioning and comprehension-monitoring techniques, summarizing, and other strategies) that students need to handle texts independently, and they constitute a necessary minimum set of tools for all literacy efforts. Attending to the vital signs of reading by focusing on students' reading skills is important in addressing the reading achievement gap. The vital signs of *readers* direct educators' attention to students' lived experiences, both in school and outside of school, and are useful for considering ways to improve the human condition. When educators attend to the vital signs of readers — the everyday lives of the students they teach — they begin to build supportive relationships with their students and thereby address the relationship gap.

The third set of vital signs, those of *reading instruction*, are intimately related to rescuing and refining the significance of literacy teaching for adolescents in this current era of accountability. In other words, they are useful for conceptualizing the rationale for literacy teaching and enhancing academic rigor in the classroom. Attention to the vital signs of reading instruction should cause educators to reflect on texts, quality instructional supports, assessments, and the potential uses of technology in an attempt to shape rigorous learning experiences for adolescents.

The vital signs of *educators* are related to shaping educational contexts characterized by caring, commitment, competence, and culpability. Adolescents benefit when they know that they belong in the learning environment, when they experience psychosocial membership, and when they feel they are in the presence of an adult advocate who is not going to give up on them (Goodenow, 1993; Price, 2000). In this sense, attention to the vital signs of educators is a critical step toward addressing the responsiveness gap. Moving toward a more anatomically complete model of literacy instruction that pays attention to these vital signs requires an understanding of the current adolescent literacy crisis and how African American adolescent males are situated within it.

Overview of the Adolescent Literacy Crisis

The term *adolescent literacy crisis* is the current descriptor used in the United States to encapsulate the more than two-thirds of all eighth- through twelfth-grade students who are reading below a proficient level. Reading achievement is clearly marked along economic, ethnic, and gender lines. The confluence of historical antecedents, social class, community membership, language, race, ethnicity, and gender; their interplay with institutional structures (e.g., schools and government); and the shaping of these institutional structures by educators and policymakers have contributed to a crisis in literacy education that is difficult to unravel. Although this crisis begins to take form in the earlier grades, it becomes more pronounced during adolescence and

contributes to the fact that more than 7,000 U.S. students drop out of high school each school day (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2006).

The landscape of adolescent literacy development and proposed solutions to the adolescent literacy crisis in the United States are influenced by, at minimum, seven elements (see Table 2). The market economy, advances in technology, and globalization have a gripping influence on the politicized discourse about adolescent literacy. The roles of reading and writing for adolescents, particularly high school students, are viewed in direct relationship with the economy. According to a recent report by the National Center on Education and the Economy (2006):

This is a world in which a very high level of preparation of reading, writing, speaking, mathematics, science, literature, history, and the arts will be an indispensable foundation for everything that comes after for most members of the workforce. It is a world in which comfort with ideas and abstractions is the passport to a good job, in which creativity and innovation are the key to a good life, in which levels of education — a very different kind of education than most of us have had — are going to be the only security there is. (p. 6)

Although an economic focus and attention to twenty-first-century literacy skills have become paramount in the national dialogue, we lack a clear definition of literacy instruction for adolescents in the United States that will translate into successful classroom practice. Without this clear definition, overwhelming and embarrassing inconsistency in literacy instruction occurs and can be expected to continue across schools. Literacy experiences and the ways that literacy instruction is conceptualized and practiced are characteristically different for adolescents attending schools in economically depressed environments and for adolescents who come from affluent homes and attend schools in affluent neighborhoods. The same differences exist in mixed-income school environments in which students' literacy experiences and academic schedules are governed by reading achievement data. Arguably, shortsighted or quick-fix solutions to the adolescent literacy crisis will continue to result in different literacy experiences and life-outcome trajectories for adolescents on opposite ends of the economic continuum.

Situating the African American Adolescent Male in the Crisis

The focus on economic projections oversimplifies the role of literacy education in the lives of African American males, who constitute 7 percent of the school-aged population. First, an economic focus fails to account for the day-to-day realities of African American males, particularly the young men living in high-poverty communities where long-term economic projections are overshadowed by immediate concerns like violence, classism, and poor schooling — conditions that cause many of them to feel dehumanized and devalued. Literacy education has to have a strong gravitational pull for African American male adolescents in their present-day contexts. Externally driven rationales for literacy instruction rooted in macrosociological concerns — such as taking on the challenges of life in a global economy, or stabilizing communities that are imploding because of concentrated poverty — fail to interrupt students' existing “maladaptive solutions” (Spencer, 1999).

Unfortunately, the African American male presence in reading research is dismal (Lindo, 2006). Up to this point, studies involving African American males have focused on factors that

characterize these young men as *at-risk*. These studies have also ignored their racialized and gendered identities and have focused on comparing their academic outcomes to those of other students (Davis, 2001; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Price, 2000). A meta-analysis is needed that examines how instructional practices, texts, and classroom contexts can be shaped to advance the literacy development of African American male adolescents, particularly the ones who experience difficulty with school-based reading (Tatum & Fisher, in press). The current absence of adequate research is contributing to policy, curricular, and pedagogical misalignments that are not effective for these young men. The lack of research on African American male adolescents contributes to three major issues:

- Many educators are failing to increase African American male adolescents' engagement with texts, and subsequently, their overall reading achievement scores.
- Specific texts and text characteristics that engage African American adolescent males are strikingly absent from the curriculum (Tatum, 2006).
- Educators find it difficult to use texts to counter in-school and out-of-school context-related issues that heighten the vulnerability level of African American males.
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The goals of literacy for African American male adolescents remain trapped in an achievement-score quagmire. At the same time, solutions to the adolescent literacy crisis are grounded in economic referents, such as the market economy and the need for future workers. These foci have unintended, negative consequences for schools' efforts to promote the literacy of African American male adolescents. First, they position adolescent literacy development as an in-school phenomenon related to standardized scores. Secondly, the crisis, as it is currently framed, affects the definition of adolescent literacy. A limited view of the crisis results in observable practical and theoretical vacillations among educators, policymakers, and educational publishers. The search for solutions to the adolescent literacy crisis remains scattered; teachers of adolescents lack clarity about what competencies outside their disciplines they need to develop; and the support provided by professional developers remains as varied as the professional developers themselves. The lives of many adolescents, particularly adolescent males of color, are treated as expendable, both within and outside of schools.

In subsequent sections of this article, I draw from a qualitative case study I conducted that supports my proposed model of a more anatomically complete model of literacy instruction. This study examined how choosing the right texts is central to advancing the literacy development of African American male adolescents. By illustrating the importance of engaging African American adolescent males with texts they find meaningful, the case study affirms the need for a more anatomically complete model of literacy instruction in schools.

African American Males and Texts

The impact of texts on the lives of African American adolescent males cannot be underestimated. Historically, texts have been central to the literacy development of African American males, with eminently clear connections among reading, writing, speaking, and actions (Tatum, 2005).

Historical accounts of the lives of African American men are laden with references to enabling texts. An *enabling text*, as I define it, is one that moves beyond a solely cognitive focus — such as skill and strategy development — to include a social, cultural, political, spiritual, or economic focus. I was able to identify such texts by examining biographical and autobiographical documents written by Black male archetypes from the past century.

As part of my examination, I constructed textual lineages (Tatum, 2007) of Black male archetypes' literary experiences. *Textual lineages* are diagrams of texts that individuals found meaningful and significant, as evidenced by documents they have written. I constructed the lineages by placing the first pivotal text the archetypes identified at the top of the diagram. I then recorded other texts in the order they were discussed in the individuals' biographical and autobiographical narratives. For example, Eldridge Cleaver, who wrote the memoir *Soul on Ice* (1968), shared “how he devoured [the book, *Negroes with Guns* by Robert Williams] and let a few friends read it, before the [prison] library dug it and put it on the blacklist” (p. 71) (see [Figure 2](#)). He described other texts as “books that one wants to read — so bad that it [causes] a taste [in] the mouth” that only the books can satisfy (p. 70). Cleaver also complained that he could not get his hands on texts that were satisfactory to a man trying to function in the society and time in which he lived.

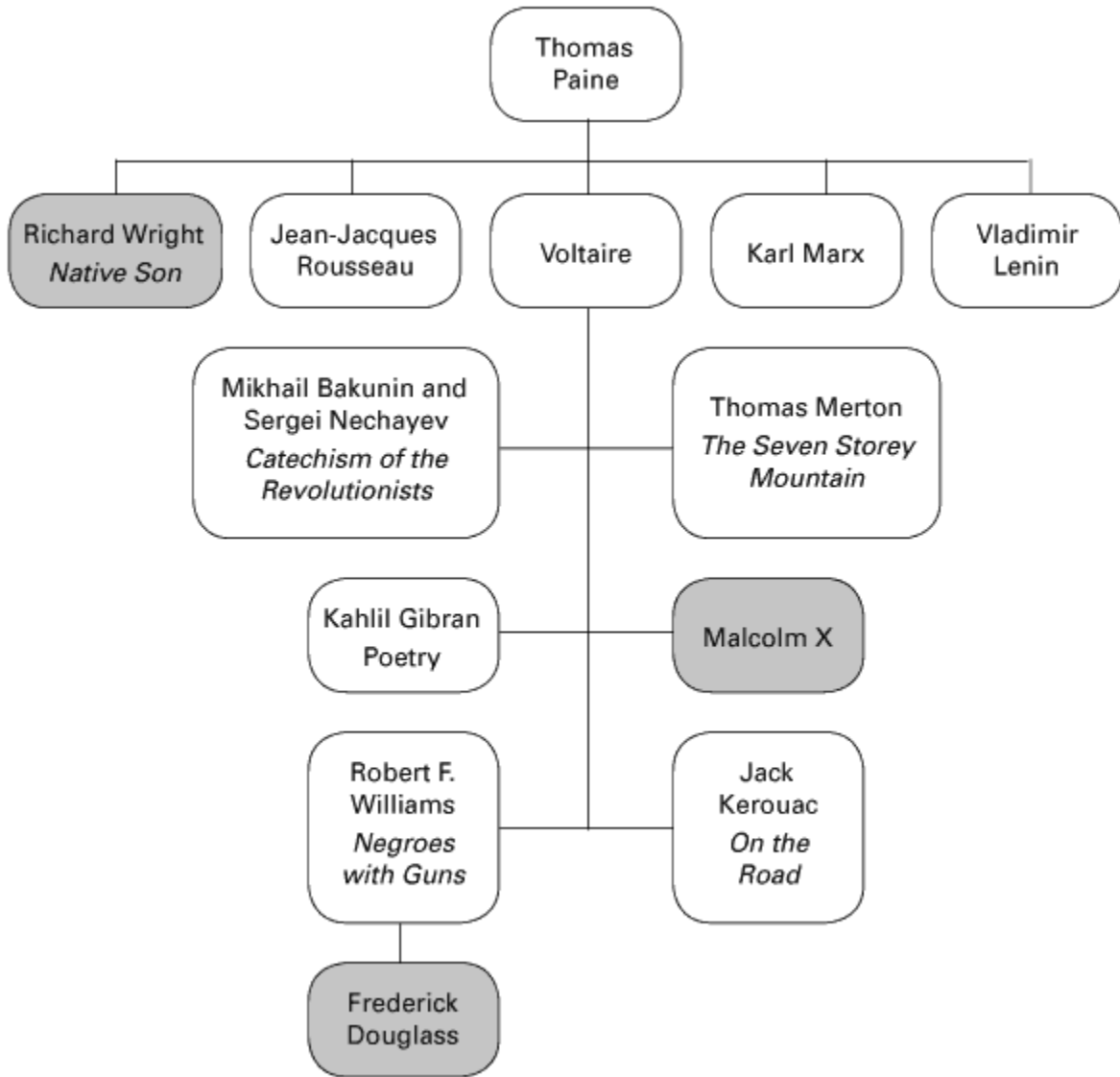


FIGURE 2 Eldridge Cleaver’s Textual Lineage, Constructed from Reading Cleaver’s Soul on Ice (1968) (The shaded boxes denote texts that recur in the textual lineages of African American males from the 1960s onward)

Subsequent to constructing the textual lineages of more than thirty Black male archetypes — among them Nat Turner, Frederick Douglass, Malcolm X, Huey Newton, and Tupac Shakur — I constructed my own textual lineage using texts that were significant to me in middle and high school (see [Figure 3](#)). I also collected 243 textual lineages from African American males in middle and high schools in an attempt to identify the characteristics of texts they found meaningful and significant, and to compare these characteristics to those identified in the examination of the textual lineages of Black male archetypes and myself (Tatum, in progress). Early analysis suggests that there are four characteristics of texts that African American males find meaningful and significant:

- They contribute to a healthy psyche.
- They focus on a collective struggle.
- They provide a road map for being, doing, and acting.
- They provide modern awareness of the real world. (Tatum, 2007)

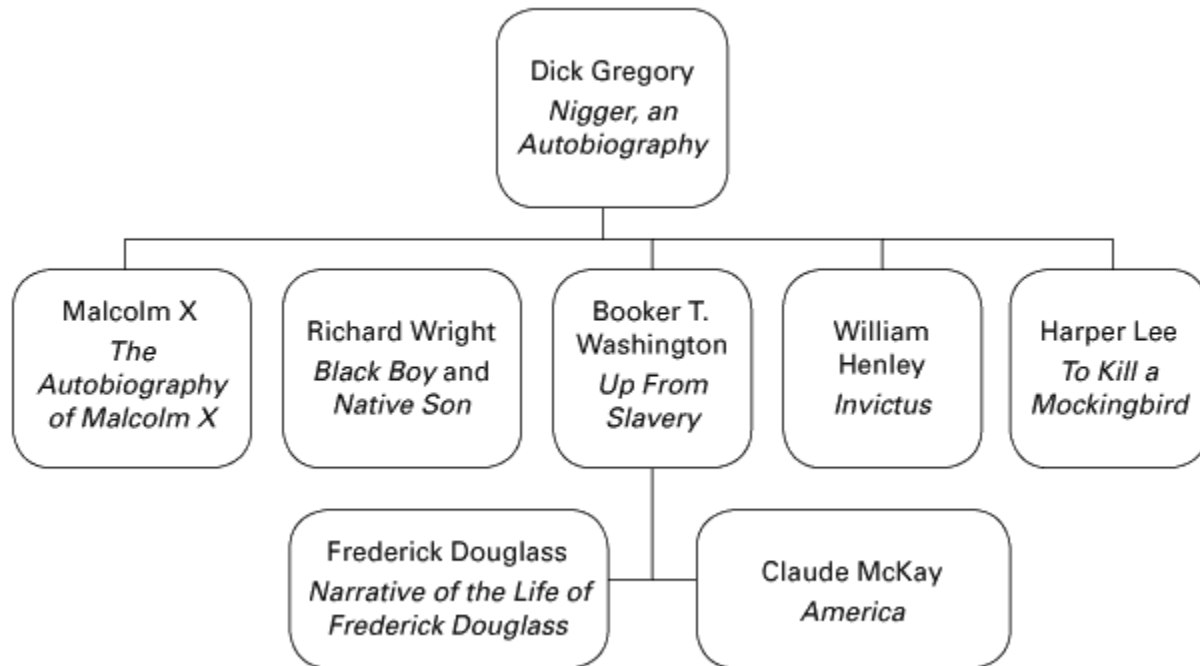


FIGURE 3 Tatum’s Textual Lineage from Middle and High School

Unfortunately, many African American male adolescents who struggle with reading are unable to identify texts that they find significant. As evidenced by the blank lineage submitted by an eighth-grade boy in an urban middle school (see [Figure 4](#)), these young men often lack a growing textual lineage. Instead, they generally encounter texts that are *disabling* — texts that reinforce their perception of being struggling readers. While disabling texts ignore students’ local contexts and their desire as adolescents for self-definition, *enabling* texts and their characteristics are central to a more anatomically complete model of literacy instruction. To investigate how an adolescent encounters and thinks about such texts, I designed the case study described in the section that follows.

Kaeson

Directions: In each box below, place the title of a book, essay, or poem that you think you will always remember. Place only one title in a box. Explain why you think you will always remember the book, essay, or poem. Look at the example.

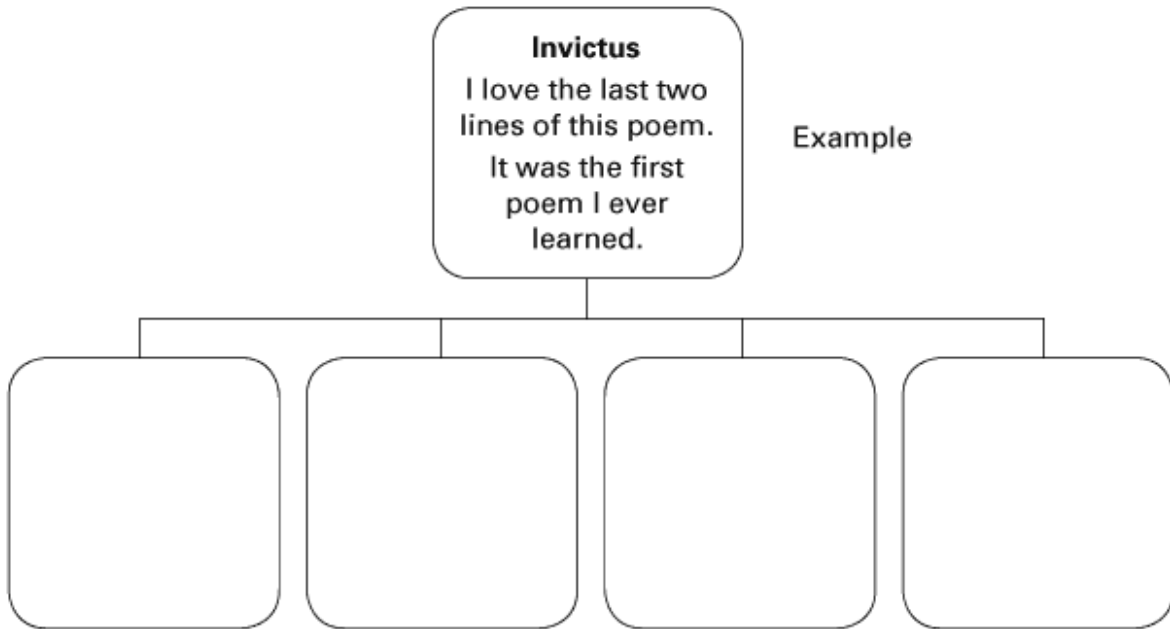


FIGURE 4 Textual Lineage of an Eighth-Grade Boy Attending an Urban Middle School

Tables

TABLE 1

Multiple Vital Signs of Literacy Instruction

	Reading	Readers	Reading Instruction	Educators
Rationale	Providing the working tools (What)	Improving the human condition (Why)	Refining the significance of literacy teaching (How)	Interacting with students, not scorecards of achievement (Who)

Vital Signs	Word Knowledge	Home Life	Quality Instructional Support	Competence
	Fluency	Culture	Text	Caring
	Strategy Knowledge	Environment	Context	Commitment
	Writing	Language	Assessment	Culpability
	Language Proficiency	Economics	Technology	
Aims to Correct	Reading Achievement Gap	Relationship Gap	Rigor Gap	Responsiveness Gap

TABLE 2**Seven Critical Elements Shaping the Landscape of Literacy Instruction in the United States**

<i>Accountability</i>	Accountability has a gripping influence on the national dialogue about adolescent literacy. Discussions and literacy reform efforts are framed by No Child Left Behind, Adequate Yearly Progress, and National Assessment of Educational Progress outcomes.
NCLB AYP NAEP	
<i>Standards</i>	Professional organizations such as the International Reading Association and the U.S. states have developed standards to shape literacy practices. These standards are often found in lesson plans and are made visible in classrooms during instruction, as mandated by school and/or district administrators.
Professional organizations States Content areas	
<i>Teacher Preparation and Teacher Professional Development</i>	Teacher education programs are increasingly held accountable for poor adolescent literacy, while at the same time there has been a proliferation of teacher professional development focused on literacy instruction across the United States. Increasingly, there are more literacy coaches assigned to middle schools and high schools to support struggling readers.
<i>Gap Focus</i>	Closing the reading achievement gap between White students and students of color has been discussed for the past forty years. Increasingly, schools are gauging their success by their ability to close the reading achievement gap. The gap is often discussed in terms of race, opportunity, or preparation.
Reading achievement gap Racial achievement gap Opportunity gap Preparation gap	
<i>Diversity</i>	Schools are experiencing major shifts in their demographics: Urban areas become destabilized as students move to surrounding suburban school districts, and increased numbers of immigrants to the United States have led to a dramatic increase in the number of ELLs in America's classrooms.
Shifting demographics English-language learners (ELLs)	
<i>Social Class</i>	Reading data are aggregated to examine the performance of students from homes with low socioeconomic status. Research also looks at the effect of parents' levels of education on students' literacy.
Poverty Parenting	
<i>Race</i>	Although the dialogue is not robust in literacy reform efforts, there is a racialized component to the gap in reading achievement. There is a reading achievement gap between middle-income African Americans and middle-income Whites.
Impact Dialogue	