

A Systematic Literature Review of Literacy Development of K-2 Black Boys

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Abstract

Systemic barriers often prevent young Black boys from full development of their potential, including in the area of literacy. This systematic literature review seeks to better understand the landscape of literacy development of Black boys in kindergarten, first, and second grades by answering the question: What does previous literature indicate about how the U.S. education ecosystem impacts K-2nd grade Black boy's language arts interests and abilities?

We used the Khan framework for this review. Searching three academic databases and an expert consultation yielded 46 relevant works, which were analyzed for their framing (i.e., asset- or deficit-based), focal areas, and findings. We identified seven themes across this body of work: literacy skills assessment, the impact of the use of Black English, inclusive and culturally relevant curricula, interventions and pedagogical approaches, professional development, student engagement, the research agenda. Our findings support an asset-based approach that emphasizes the abilities of young Black boys to flourish academically when appropriate support is provided.

Keywords:

K-2, Early Elementary, Black Boys, Literacy, Asset-Based

Introduction

With an increasing international focus on evidence-based literacy instruction, educators require adequate support to teach racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse students through high-quality methods of instruction. Academic performance, especially in reading, differs between young Black boys and other student groups, with their reading scores being lower than that of boys who are White, Latino, or Asian (Moore & Phelps, 2021). Removing the systemic barriers that result in such gaps in learning opportunities is not only a moral imperative for educators but also a necessary component of supporting all students in reaching their full personal potential.

Prior, related work includes a literature review on Black boys' literacy across K-12 (Tatum et al., 2021). This project expands on that work by (1) including studies published in the last four years, (2) identifying themes for K-2 students specifically, (3) include literature in addition to peer-reviewed studies



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(see below), and (4) focusing on the United States in general, as opposed to focusing on its southern region.

This systematic literature review analyzes literature related to the literacy development of Black boys from kindergarten to second grade, a stage of literacy growth critical for literacy identity development and achievement. Our research question for this study was: What does previous literature indicate about how the U.S. education ecosystem impacts K-2nd grade Black boy's language arts interests and abilities?

The results of this systematic literature review shed light on implications for educators and researchers in supporting Black boys' literacy. We note that some research focuses on what is called African American English, African American Vernacular English, or Black English. For the sake of consistency, we will use the term Black English, regardless of the term used in the original literature.

Methodology

The examination of differences in performance between various groups of students is often framed by deficit thinking (Davis, 2019), the implicit assumption that any performance gaps stem from shortcomings of the children, their families, or communities. This approach tends to blame students – especially those from groups who have been discriminated against – for gaps in academic achievement instead of focusing on the aspects of the educational system that have failed to support the students, including by failing to provide appropriate opportunities to all students. In this systematic literature review, we sought to avoid deficit thinking and instead focused on the assets and strengths that students bring to their education, despite being embedded within systems that often present numerous barriers to their success.

One author identifies as a Black, middle-class, heterosexual, Christian female in her thirties, whose first language is English. She is a former early childhood educator and currently focuses her work on creating racially inclusive environments for students and families. She is the mother of a Black son and daughters. Another author identifies as a White, middle class woman. Her background includes time as an English Language Arts teacher and as a curriculum developer. She is currently a researcher focused on improving equity for all students, particularly those from groups who have been historically marginalized.

One author identifies as a cisgender, White, middle-class woman. Her background includes teaching racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse students across grades K-8. She is currently an Associate Professor of Elementary & Literacy Education, and her scholarship and teaching focuses on the preparation and support of K-6 teachers to teach in culturally

affirming ways. One author is an education researcher whose path started as a computer scientist in industry, who then moved to academia where she discovered that some of the same issues in industry that are related to identity impact who ultimately studies and chooses computer science as a career path. She approaches her education research through a lens of scientific inquiry, ethics, and fairness to explore how education can be shaped so that all students may flourish.

For our systematic literature review, we used the Khan framework (Khan et al., 2003), which delineates the review in five major steps. We selected the Khan methodology since it offers a clear, systematic framework that ensures thoroughness, consistency, and replicability. The five steps outlined by Khan—framing the research question, identifying relevant literature, selecting studies for inclusion, assessing the quality of those studies, and synthesizing the findings—align with our goals of conducting a comprehensive and unbiased review. By adhering to this established process, we aim to provide a transparent and replicable review that contributes meaningful insights to the field. Each of these steps, which include the results, is discussed in the following sections.

Step 1: Framing the Question

We framed our question based on our knowledge of the field. Given the awareness that racism affects the educational experiences of Black boys (Carey et al., 2022; Nyborg & Curry, 2003; Staggers-Hakim, 2016), we wanted to better understand literacy development among Black boys. We wanted to learn what the literature indicates about how the educational ecosystem impacts K-2nd grade Black boys' language arts interests and abilities. Thus we framed our research question accordingly to What does previous literature indicate about how the U.S. education ecosystem impacts K-2nd grade Black boy's language arts interests and abilities?

Step 2: Identifying Relevant Work

To identify relevant work, we specified the following process a priori. We selected three databases given their extensive materials in education research literature: SCOPUS, EBSCO, and ERIC-EBSCO. We did not limit results by date of publication.

We defined the following search string to give to each of the identified databases:

- ("Black boys" OR "African American boys" OR "African-American boys") AND
- ("Early elementary" OR "Kindergarten" OR "first grade" OR "second grade" OR "early childhood" OR "1st grade" OR "2nd grade" OR "K-2") AND

- ("communication" OR "writing" OR "reading" OR "vocabulary" OR "letter recognition" OR "phonics" OR "phonemics" OR "syllables" OR "sight words" OR
- "literacy" OR "reading" OR "language arts" OR "high frequency words" OR "reading fluency")

Step 3: Assessing the Quality of the Articles

One of the researchers conducted the search in July 2024. Using our keyword search against all three databases resulted in 1,946 articles. The researcher then first removed the duplicates (n = 230), and the resulting 1,716 articles were assessed for quality and relevance. Two articles were excluded because they were not written in English.

Our team met to define the criteria for the quality assessment that would align with the research question as:

- focused on the United States
- focused on Black boys, in whole or part
- focused on kindergarten, first, and/or second grade
- addressed literacy, including oral and/or written communication, reading, vocabulary, and so forth
- described challenges and/or opportunities for learning success

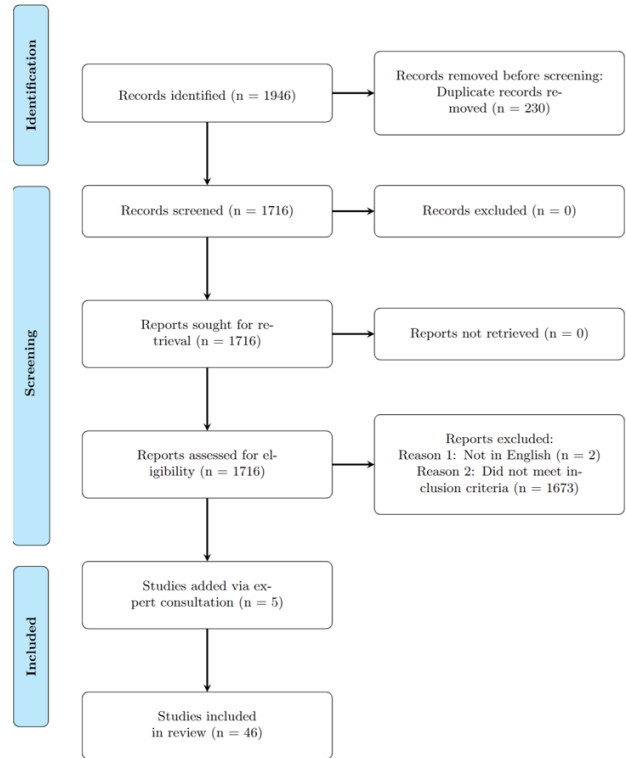
Note that as a team we collectively and intentionally made the choice to include some articles in addition to peer-reviewed studies, such as research-based position papers. (We define a research-based position paper as a piece that incorporates prior research in the articulation of a position, in contrast to other position papers or opinion pieces, which may not make reference to prior research.) We made this decision since we recognized that important contributions might stem from these sources, including the possibility of more research-based position papers written after the global reckoning on racial justice and increased racial awareness that arose after the 2020 murder of George Floyd as well as the possibility for historical bias in publishing.

Step 4: Summarizing the Evidence (Results)

The result of this process was a set of 41 articles. We supplemented the systematic review with an expert consultation, an addendum to a traditional literature review process that may provide additional useful insight into the topic (Morris et al., 2018), which resulted in the addition of 5 articles. Thus, there are a total of 46 articles in the dataset.¹ This methodology is summarized in the PRISMA diagram (see Figure 1),

created according to the PRISMA methodology (Page et al., 2021).

Figure 1
PRISMA diagram.

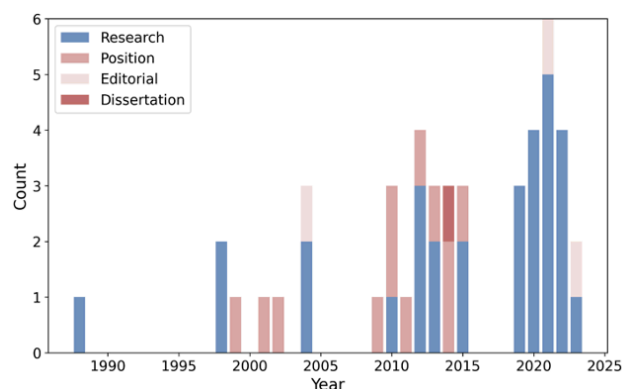


Once the set of papers was determined and the criteria for the quality assessment was defined, the set of papers was divided among the authors. We used a spreadsheet to record key information about each item in the set, using the following list of questions:

- Did it assume an asset-based or a deficit-based approach to the study of Black boys?
- Did it focus on the engagement of caregivers?
- Did it focus on the socio-economic status of caregivers?
- Did it focus on the behavior of Black boys?
- Did it focus on Black English?
- If specified, what aspect(s) of literacy did it examine (e.g., vocabulary, oral language, writing)?
- If a study: what type (e.g., qualitative) was it?
- If a study: what was the context?
- What are the key findings (for a study) or concepts (if not)?

Figure 2

Type of paper by year of publication.



We classified papers as either research articles, position papers, editorials, or dissertations (see Figure 2). While one article appeared in the 1980s (Brutten & Miller, 1988), papers started appearing more regularly in late 1990s, with growth in this area from 2019 through 2024—in particular of research articles. We also note that the analysis was conducted in mid-2024, and we anticipate that more articles have been published in the remainder of the year. Position papers were more common before 2016, and none are in the dataset after that date. We also found approximately equal counts of position papers ($n = 12$), qualitative studies ($n = 11$), and quantitative studies ($n = 10$), with fewer mixed methods studies ($n = 6$), editorials ($n = 3$), literature reviews ($n = 3$), and dissertations ($n = 1$); see Table 1.

Table 1

Count of papers by type.

Type	Count	References
Position Paper	12	Brown and Donnor (2011), Diller (1999), Hughes-Hassell et al. (2010), Husband (2012b, 2014), Jones (2002), Ladson-Billings and Gomez (2001), Rashid (2009), Walton and Wiggan (2014), Weddington (2010), Wood and Jocius (2013), and Wright et al. (2015)
Qualitative Study	11	Curenton et al. (2022), Everett and Moten (2022), Ford et al. (2021), Frieson and Scalise (2021), Pressley et al. (2004), Sherbine (2019), Sherfinski (2023a, 2023b), Stevenson and Ross (2015), Wynter-Hoyte and Smith (2020), and Yoon (2015)
Quantitative Study	10	Brutten and Miller (1988), Craig et al. (1998a, 1998b), Fitton et al. (2021), Gibson and Cartledge (2012), Holt and Asagbra (2021), Noltemeyer et al. (2019), Russell and Drake Shiffler (2019), Washington et al. (2019), and Winsler et al. (2013)
Mixed Methods Study	6	Hamilton and DeThorne (2021), Henderson et al. (2020), Holloman (2022), Matthews et al. (2010), Tatum and Muhammad (2012), and Washington and Craig (2004)
Literature Review	3	Husband (2012a), Husband and Kang (2020), and Tatum et al. (2021)
Editorial	3	Hale (2004), Parker (2023), and Thomas (2019)
Dissertation	1	Younger (2014)

Descriptive Statistics

When examined by focus area, one-third (33%, $n = 15$) focused on the usage of Black English and 26% ($n = 12$) focused on student behavior. Additionally, 20% ($n = 9$) focused on caregiver engagement and 9% ($n = 4$) focused on caregiver income (see Table 2). Note that there is some overlap among these, so that an item may appear in more than one of these categories.

Table 2

Count of papers by caregiver engagement, student behavior, caregiver income level, and use of Black English

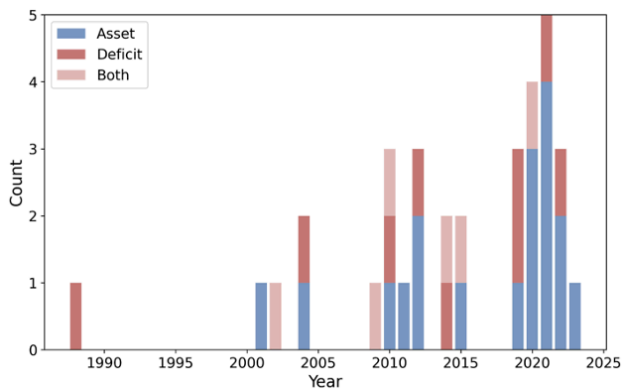
Type	Count	References
Caregiver engagement	9	Hale (2004), Holt and Asagbra (2021), Husband and Kang (2020), Matthews et al. (2010), Pressley et al. (2004), Stevenson and Ross (2015), Weddington (2010), Wright et al. (2015), and Wynter-Hoyte and Smith (2020)
Student behavior	12	Brown and Donnor (2011), Hale (2004), Hamilton and DeThorne (2021), Holloman (2022), Husband (2012a), Husband and Kang (2020), Matthews et al. (2010), Sherbine (2019), Sherfinski (2023a), Stevenson and Ross (2015), Tatum et al. (2021), and Wynter-Hoyte and Smith (2020)
Caregiver income level	4	Craig et al. (1998a), Fitton et al. (2021), Matthews et al. (2010), and Winsler et al. (2013)
Use of Black English	15	Brown and Donnor (2011), Craig et al. (1998a, 1998b), Diller (1999), Fitton et al. (2021), Frieson and Scalise (2021), Hamilton and DeThorne (2021), Jones (2002), Russell and Drake Shiffler (2019), Sherbine (2019), Sherfinski (2023b), Tatum et al. (2021), Washington and Craig (2004), Weddington (2010), and Wynter-Hoyte and Smith (2020)

We determined the count of papers per year that had, where applicable, asset or deficit framing. To do this, the reviewers considered whether gaps in student performance were implied to be the fault of the student (indicating a deficit framing) or whether the strengths that students bring to their educations were emphasized, indicating an asset framing.

For some papers, this question of framing was not applicable ($n = 12$, 26%), both framings were used ($n = 6$, 13%), or the paper was unclear in its framing ($n = 1$, 2%). For the remainder of the papers, an approach of asset framing was more common ($n = 18$, 39%) than deficit framing ($n = 9$, 20%). As Figure 3 shows, asset-based framing is concentrated in more recent years, while deficit framing has been approximately consistent across time.

Figure 3

Framing (i.e., asset-based or deficit-based) of papers in the dataset; excludes papers where the categories are not applicable.



When we considered the aspects of literacy covered in the papers (see Table 3), general literacy ($n = 24$ or 52%) was the primary focus. A focus on reading ($n = 11$ or 24%) was the next most common, with fewer papers focusing on oral literacy ($n = 6$ or 13%), writing ($n = 2$ or 4%), and both writing and oral literacy ($n = 3$, 7%).

Table 3

Papers by aspect of literacy.

Type	Count	References
General literacy	24	Brown and Donnor (2011), Diller (1999), Everett and Moten (2022), Fitton et al. (2021), Ford et al. (2021), Gibson and Cartledge (2012), Holloman (2022), Holt and Asagbra (2021), Husband and Kang (2020), Jones (2002), Ladson-Billings and Gomez (2001), Matthews et al. (2010), Pressley et al. (2004), Rashid (2009), Russell and Drake Shiffler (2019), Sherbine (2019), Sherfinski (2023a), Stevenson and Ross (2015), Tatum and Muhammad (2012), Tatum et al. (2021), Walton and Wiggan (2014), Weddington (2010), Winsler et al. (2013), and Wright et al. (2015)
Reading only	11	Curenton et al. (2022), Henderson et al. (2020), HughesHassell et al. (2010), Husband (2012a, 2012b, 2014), Noltemeyer et al. (2019), Thomas (2019), Washington et al. (2019), Wood and Jocius (2013), and Younger (2014)
Oral literacy only	6	Brutten and Miller (1988), Craig et al. (1998a, 1998b), Frieson and Scalise (2021), Hamilton and DeThorne (2021), and Washington and Craig (2004)
Writing and oral literacy	3	Hale (2004), Sherfinski (2023b), and Wynter-Hoyte and Smith (2020)
Writing only	2	Parker (2023) and Yoon (2015)

Thematic Analysis

After reviewing all papers in the dataset, the authors met to determine what themes had emerged across the papers. We determined that there were seven main themes (as described below), based on our reading of the literature.

Literacy Skills Assessment

One theme that emerged from this dataset concerns the assessment of Black boys' literacy skills. Washington et al. (2019) investigated the literacy skills of Black elementary school students living in a low-income area via a longitudinal study. Language skills were similar for boys and girls, but older girls outperformed boys in reading skills. Similarly, Brutten and Miller (1988) found that the genders were similar in their levels of disfluency but that Black children were less disfluent than White children. Interestingly, Winsler et al. (2013) found that Black boys in elementary school who did not speak English at home were more likely to qualify for the gifted program than their peers who did. Washington and Craig (2004) found that some language assessments do not accurately assess Black students due to the students' use of Black English. Nonetheless, the researchers found that their screening protocol for preschool and kindergarten students was accurate in identifying language impediments in children who speak Black English.

Literacy and Black English

Several articles explored Black English and its interaction with the literacy development in Black children. Weddington (2010) disputes the common notion that the use of Black English is responsible for negative impacts on literacy development, instead suggesting that systemic issues are responsible. Weddington suggests that training teachers in culturally responsive instruction and developing teachers' belief in the potential of all students to succeed are key to reducing gaps in achievements. Weddington's work aligns with a study that found that indicators of Black English found in student writing did not predict literacy scores (Fitton et al., 2021).

Similarly, Craig et al. (1998b) found that comprehension tasks were not correlated with the use of Black English. In fact, one ethnographic case study showed how children leverage their Black Language ability in ways that confirm their identities and showcase their literacy (Frieson & Scalise, 2021). And Craig et al. (1998a) conducted an investigation with Black students (aged 4 to 6.5) to determine the average communication units for students who spoke Black English. They found that older children's language during free play contained longer communication units. A study by Wynter-Hoyte and Smith (2020) found that it was possible to integrate Black English and academic English in a writing workshop for first-grade students to encourage the development of positive racial and linguistic identities, which can be seen as a point of reference to the acceptance of Black English.

More specific to Black boys, Hamilton and DeThorne (2021) drew on a framework of culturally and linguistically responsive classroom management

to demonstrate how one Black boy received more behavior-related warnings related to his use of Black English. However, in a study of Black first grade boys by Russell and Drake Shiffler (2019) found that an intervention designed to improve their phonological awareness – particularly in instances where Black English may differ from academic English – showed promise for improving students' literacy skills.

Inclusive and Culturally Relevant Curricula

In the context of a review of the literature, Tatum and Muhammad (2012) found that the instructional methods used by teachers significantly influence the reading performance of Black boys. Wynter-Hoyte and Smith (2020) pleaded with educators to abandon the excuse of needing to meet learning standards as the reason for continuing to teach curriculum that centers whiteness and creates a limited historical narrative of Black people.

Sherfinski (2023b) demonstrates how two Black kindergarten boys push back on semi-scripted curriculum instruction during a writer's workshop to draw on their personal and cultural resources and engage in playful, holistic learning. They argue that when educators do not individualize scripted curriculum, Black boys in particular are harmed. On the other hand, in a survey of the characteristics of a high-achieving school that serves Black students, Pressley et al. (2004) noted, among many other factors, that literature by and about Black Americans was common in the curriculum. This practice suggests cultural awareness and an intentional effort to promote a curriculum that mirrors student demographics.

Many articles focused on the impact of culturally responsive curriculum, including texts. Curenton et al. (2022) propose a theoretical model for fostering racial literacy via storybooks. In this model, books that are racially affirming prompt conversation, which in turn prompts both positive identity as well as positive emotional regulation. The result of this process is racial literacy. Wood and Jocius (2013) posit a need for critical literacy with Black boys that includes using culturally relevant texts, a collaborative learning environment, and critical conversations about the text. Wright et al. (2015) stress the need for Black boys to have 'mirror' books – or books that reflect who they are. Similarly, Wood and Jocius (2013) discuss how children should see protagonists that are of the same cultural background. Henderson et al. (2020) offer recommendations for primary educators to critically analyze their classroom libraries for culturally diverse texts. For example, educators can consider the extent to which materials mirror their students' identities.

Stevenson and Ross (2015) propose a theoretical model for how the use of racially affirming storybooks can lead, via conversations of topics related to ethnic-

racial socialization (e.g., cultural pride) to positive racial identity, positive emotional regulation, and racial literacy. In contrast, Parker (2023) argues that a lack of wide-ranging literacy tasks negatively impact Black boys as writers. Husband (2012b) proposes that teachers should use culturally relevant literature that reflects Black culture, in both broad and specific contexts, along with increasing the number of texts with male characters.

Interventions and Pedagogical Approaches

Several studies report on interventions that show promise for promoting literacy among young Black boys. In one study, community members provided dialogic reading intervention to Black boys in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten in a rural community (Holt & Asagbra, 2021), leading to significant improvement in the boys' literacy skills. Walton and Wiggan (2014) identified readers theater as a promising practice for supporting the literacy, particularly the reading fluency, of Black boys. Husband (2012a) also suggests using readers theater to allow Black boys to be active participants in their learning. Further, Husband suggests that Black boys would benefit from alternative reading support systems, particularly literacy programs for Black boys that are led by Black men. Tatum and Muhammad (2012) identified the need to use historical framings to approach literacy instruction with Black boys through literary presence, literary pursuits, and literary character.

Using a graphic organizer, connecting to students' interests, and including more comprehension strategies in lessons are all methods found to be beneficial for promoting literacy among young Black boys (Younger, 2014). In a small ($n = 4$) study of Black boys, Gibson and Cartledge (2012) found that a fluency-building activity improved fluency but not comprehension.

Quality Professional Development for Teachers

Ladson-Billings and Gomez (2001) argue that careful work in teachers' professional learning communities – where teachers themselves identify the ways in which their schools can present barriers to some students – are the key to improving learning outcomes for all students. This position is supported by, for example, a case study of a Black kindergarten boy (Sherfinski, 2023a), which showed that White teachers' lack of training could amplify the effects of microaggressions in the classroom. Similarly, White teachers have reflected on how their limited experiences could shortchange their Black students and how attention to the needs of these students could result in improved outcomes (Diller, 1999).

Other work supports the importance of quality professional development as well. Holloman (2022) found that the reading comprehension scores of 2nd

and 3rd grade Black boys improved when professional development emphasizing culturally responsive teaching and a professional learning community were implemented. Ford et al. (2021) conclude from a case study of a gifted and talented Black third-grader that teachers require cultural competence in order to provide equitable learning experiences to all students, including those from minoritized backgrounds. Attending a grade-level meeting, consulting with other colleagues, and having a tutoring program for the students and a professional development program for the teachers are all promising practices for increasing the literacy levels of Black boys (Younger, 2014).

Student Engagement

Jones (2002) suggests reasons why Black boys have low reading interest, including educators' low expectations and educators' biases against Black English while they simultaneously blame Black families for the state of education for Black children. Similarly, Hale (2004) identified practices that may constitute systematic barriers to the success of Black children. These practices include the reassignment of curricular topics from higher to lower grade levels, school leaders' lack of awareness of students' backgrounds, and unequal preschool educational experiences. Hale (2004) also identified family support and ensuring success in early reading as keys to supporting the success of these young students. Husband (2012a) argues that prescriptive curriculum is a factor in early childhood and elementary Black boys' declining interest in reading.

Other articles examine how best to engage Black boys in literacy. Via a case study, Everett and Moten (2022) explored how engaging, meaningful texts enabled Black boys to advance their literacy skills. To help motivate second grade Black boys to engage in reading, Thomas (2019) introduced the first book in a series either during read-aloud or independent reading, included the follow-up books in the series in the classroom library, prioritized student commentary in chapter discussions, and assigned students the role of organizing and caring for the classroom library. Hughes-Hassell et al. (2010) offer recommendations for supporting Black boys as readers during 2nd to 5th grade, as they progress to becoming transitional readers, in order to address declining interest in reading due to factors such as a lack of culturally responsive texts. Sherbine (2019) uses a posthumanist lens to analyze ethnographic data of three Black boys' literacy engagement during a literacy workshop to demonstrate how these second graders diverge from narrow definitions of literacy, arguing for a broadening of the conceptualization of literacy to allow for more just literacy instruction.

Rashid (2009) cataloged the characteristics of early childhood education programs that best meet the

needs of Black boys; these attributes include high expectations, individualized literacy activities, higher levels of physical activity – especially culturally relevant activities – in the classroom, and an asset-focused approach. Similarly, Husband (2014) identified a framework for better engaging Black boys in elementary school in reading, with three focal areas: curriculum, pedagogy, and the institution. Within the curriculum category, Husband (2014) identified promising ways to improve engagement, such as using curriculum with themes that tend to appeal to boys, including content related to real-life experiences. Pedagogical strategies include adopting active learning strategies such as movement and singing, and institutional factors include not overemphasizing the acquisition of basic literacy skills.

The Research Agenda

A few pieces commented on research that involves Black boys and literacy. Tatum et al. (2021) provide an overview of the research (from 1999 to 2020) on Black male literacies, demonstrating key foci and suggesting several avenues for future research: developing a vision for the literacy of Black men, conduct more research (both qualitative and quantitative) across many kinds of contexts, and promote appropriate theoretical frameworks.

A recent literature review found fewer than two dozen research studies focused on literacy and young Black boys (Husband & Kang, 2020), suggesting the need for much more research in this area. The literature that does exist was categorized by Husband and Kang (2020) as reflecting five major themes: (1) the importance of culturally responsive texts, (2) a stress on critical literacy (e.g., focusing on social justice), (3) offering opportunities for student choice and collaborative work, (4) implementing some specific instructional strategies, such as phonemic awareness, and (5) considering the larger school context (e.g., disproportionate discipline).

Johnson (2022) argued that researchers should frame research goals focused on the expertise, abilities, and insights of Black children – in contrast to some research which can be overly-focused on, for example, (perceived) behavior problems. Similarly, Brown and Donnor (2011) argue for a necessary new narrative on Black men's literacy that moves away from framing Black boys as at-risk and in need of behavior modification strategies.

Yoon (2015) determined that social and cultural aspects of language were not

consistently measurable on the classroom assessments for Black kindergartens, suggesting that more research is needed in this area to ensure that appropriate assessments exist.

Step 5. Interpreting the Findings, Including Recommendations

As the results section shows, the major themes in the literature around Black boys' literacy development are:

1. literacy skills assessment,
2. impact of the use of Black English,
3. inclusive and culturally relevant curricula,
4. interventions and pedagogical approaches,
5. professional development,
6. student engagement, and
7. the research agenda.

We note that, as the previous section suggests, there is often some overlap between these categories, such as work suggesting that more research related to assessment is needed (Yoon, 2015), thus showing an overlap between the themes of literacy skills assessment and the research agenda.

Figure 4

A summary of principles of an asset-based approach to literacy development among young Black boys.

AN ASSET-BASED APPROACH TO LITERACY DEVELOPMENT AMONG YOUNG BLACK BOYS		
MINDSET	SUPPORT	ACTION
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Practitioners need more access to professional development that supports their ability to adapt scripted curriculum to be more culturally relevant Assessments should stem from an asset-based view of the capability of all students to develop strong literacy skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider Black English as a neutral/positive aspect of literacy Use texts that are meaningful to students Encourage high expectations Choose physically active pedagogies Promote interventions with evidence of promise for all students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conduct research that supports the critical analysis of curriculum Infuse the curriculum with culturally relevant learning materials Conduct research focused on student strengths (instead of, e.g., perceived behavior problems)

The themes identified in this set can be categorized into three broad groups: mindset, support, and action; see Figure 4. While, once again, there can be some overlap of categories, we conceive mindset as involving topics related to professional development and literacy skills development. Professional development should focus on providing teachers with the evidence that supports a mindset focused on taking an asset-based approach that sees the potential for all children to learn despite external obstacles and structural barriers. Practitioners also need more access to professional development that supports their ability to adapt scripted curriculum to be more culturally relevant. Similarly, the assessment

of literacy skills should stem from an asset-based view of the capability of all students to develop strong literacy skills, and such assessment in turn provides further evidence for an asset-based mindset that encourages the potential in all students to develop robust literacy skills.

The broad grouping of support includes the themes of the impact of Black English, interventions and pedagogical approaches, and student engagement. The studies in the dataset suggest that Black English's impact on the literacy development of Black boys is either neutral or positive and should be treated as such. Boys who can code switch bring a distinct strength to their studies. Thus, Black English use is a practice that can be supported. Supporting promising pedagogical approaches and fostering student engagement involves choosing texts that are meaningful to students, encouraging high expectations, choosing physically active pedagogies, and promoting interventions with evidence of promise for all students.

The third broad group is action, which focuses on the themes of inclusive and culturally relevant curricula and the research agenda. Such curricula is a key part of supporting the literacy development of Black boys, and this relates to, as previously mentioned, the use of texts that are meaningful to students. And one of the most important results of the analysis of the body of research is that there simply is not enough of it, as Tatum et al. (2021) argue. Thus, a key area for action is promoting more research into the literacy development of young Black boys.

Cross-cutting all of these themes is concern with an asset-based approach. Many papers display a deficit-based approach in the introduction to the work by, for example, presenting the difference in test scores between Black boys and other children in a way that suggests that Black boys are lacking, deficient, or problematic. In many cases, the remainder of the paper does not have a deficit lens and, in fact, often appears focused on providing improved opportunities for Black boys to counteract systemic inequities. Study authors can benefit from introducing their work in ways other than with a deficit frame.

This does not mean that, for example, statistics showing differential performance cannot be included. Rather, it means framing them to suggest that historical and systematic factors – not individual Black boys or their families or communities – are responsible for the difference. Similarly, the use of Black English is sometimes blamed for differing performances in literacy skills, but the evidence in this dataset suggests that this is not in fact the case. Likewise, student engagement may be approached from the deficit-based perspective of focusing on the behavior problems of individual students or it may be approached from an asset-based perspective

that focuses on how meaningful texts can positively engage students in their own literacy development.

We note a possible limitation to this study: as a literature review, it relies on the work of previous researchers, who – as with all researchers – bring their own potential for bias into their work. Therefore, some of the gaps in what is known about the literacy development of young Black boys may be due to these biases as well as to biases in the educational system.

Conclusion

This systematic literature review identified seven major themes – forming three broad categories – that sketch the landscape of what is known about the literacy development of Black boys in the early elementary grades.

One benefit of a systematic review of the literature such as this one is that it makes possible distillation of lessons learned from a variety of research studies and other work. This distillation, in turn, can then be leveraged to improve literacy instruction for Black boys. This improvement might include, for example, integrating literacy instruction with learning in other subject areas. Our work in this systematic literature review was motivated in part by the desire to better understand literacy development in young Black boys as a precursor to work on a series of storybooks that could promote that literacy development but also promote inclusivity in computing education for all children, especially Black girls.

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Footnotes

¹The included studies are Brown and Donnor (2011), Bratten and Miller (1988), Craig et al. (1998b, 1998a), Curenton et al. (2022), Diller (1999), Everett and Moten (2022), Fitton et al. (2021), Ford et al. (2021), Frieson and Scalise (2021), Gibson and Cartledge (2012), Hale (2004), Hamilton and DeThorne (2021), Henderson et al. (2020), Holloman (2022), Holt and Asagbra (2021), Hughes-Hassell et al. (2010), Husband (2012b, 2012a, 2014), Husband and Kang (2020), Jones (2002), Ladson-Billings and Gomez (2001), Matthews et al. (2010), Noltemeyer et al. (2019), Parker (2023), Pressley et al. (2004), Rashid (2009), Russell and Drake Shiffler (2019), Sherbine (2019), Sherfinski (2023b, 2023a), Stevenson and Ross (2015), Tatum and Muhammad (2012), Tatum et al. (2021), Thomas (2019), Walton and Wiggan (2014), Washington and Craig (2004), Washington et al. (2019), Weddington (2010), Winsler et al. (2013), Wood and Jocius (2013), Wright et al. (2015), Wynter-Hoyte and Smith (2020), Yoon (2015), and Younger (2014).

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