

Running head: COMPLICATING ACHIEVEMENT

Minnesota's Immigrant Students: The READ Act, Comprehensive Achievement and Civic Readiness, and Lingering Lessons from the Haitian Community Center (HCC) in Miami, Florida

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Abstract

Though nearly fifteen years apart, the contexts of my dissertation and the landscape of Minnesota's schools today share similarities. These similarities are rooted in the process of racialization in the United States (US) and the history of racial projects in schools. This paper uses research and findings from my dissertation to examine the pervasiveness of familiar practices currently upheld by legislation like the Minnesota Reading to Ensure Academic Development (READ) Act and its implementation at the state level. These practices rely on claims made in the name of "science" and "evidence" to justify a simple view of reading at the expense of culturally relevant teaching. Examination of the narratives that support the READ Act illuminate ways in which Minnesota's immigrant students are then denied access to goals outlined in Comprehensive Achievement and Civic Readiness (CACR). When CACR is viewed through findings from my dissertation, it illustrates an example of how education leaders can support the liberation and academic achievement of Minnesota's immigrant students.

Introduction

St. Louis Park (SLP) Public Schools has frequently been recognized for centering student voice, especially in our continuous improvement planning process. Since 2020, SLP has hired a diverse cohort of SLP High School students to work as Youth Data Analyst (YDA) interns in the Assessment, Research, and Evaluation (ARE) department. These students study the district's data and conduct a research project that leads to recommendations for the site goal-setting process. Although YDA has been recognized locally and nationally, little has been shared about the study that inspired YDA's creation. This study is my dissertation entitled: *Educación and Culturally Relevant Teaching in U.S. Public Schools: Lessons from the Haitian Community Center (HCC) in Miami, Florida* (Un, 2013).

For nearly one year, I conducted a qualitative case study with this community and learned about an organization dedicated to youth leadership development and academic achievement. Their model celebrated students' Haitian ethnic identity, additive schooling practices (Valenzuela, 1999), and a belief that youth were innate leaders. There, I saw Haitian youth working alongside adults to nurture the growth of younger Haitian students. In fact, watching Haitian youth lead and partner with adults at the HCC is one reason why SLP students partner with ARE's department today.

Like many ARE departments, our team is tasked with reporting annual metrics that address goals in the Reading to Ensure Academic Development (READ) Act and Minnesota's Comprehensive Achievement and Civic Readiness (CACR) framework (Minnesota Department of Education [MDE], n.d.). Lately, I have wondered about the lessons the HCC could offer to this process. For example, how do lessons from the HCC offer Minnesota schools a better understanding of "academic achievement," especially for students from immigrant backgrounds? Theories present at the HCC, like *educación* (Valenzuela, 1999) and cultural ecological theory of immigration and academic success (Ogbu, 1987), are not mentioned in the READ Act (Curriculum and Assessment, 2025). In contrast to claims supporting the READ Act, studies conducted by researchers like Valenzuela (1999) and Ogbu (1987) highlight the limitations of defining academic achievement solely through standardized testing metrics, especially for immigrant students.

Furthermore, this paper explores the similarities between my dissertation study and Minnesota's education landscape today. In this paper, I reflect on some of the lessons from my dissertation and Minnesota's READ Act to highlight how these two moments share four themes: 1) race and racism still impact the experiences of students from immigrant and multilingual backgrounds; 2) standardizing schools through legislation represents a racial project that denies historically underserved communities a culturally relevant education; 3) scientific racism is still pervasive and invisible; and 4) hope can be found in laws like CACR.

It is also important to highlight what this paper is not. For one, this paper is not a direct critique of the entire MDE organization. Aside from the Minnesota READ Act, there is a lot of great work happening at MDE. MDE's Ten Commitments to Equity (MDE, 2018), the evolution of World's Best Workforce (WBWF) into CACR legislation (MDE, n.d.) and Minnesota's Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MnMTSS) are a few examples of work that I believe is moving in the right direction. Likewise, the purpose of this paper is not to criticize educators who, with good intentions, have been lured by podcasts' and journalists' quick-fix solutions to increasing reading scores on standardized tests. This paper is also not an attempt to engage in a debate about reading-specific research. It is also not a critique of structured literacy instruction itself. This paper does, however, argue that standardizing reading instruction for all students in a "one-size fits all" model is problematic. In today's charged political context, this paper is also not about cultural fights or political parties. Historically, in fact, both political parties have brought

us to this moment. Furthermore, this paper aims to push administrators, policymakers, educators, and anyone invested in the academic achievement of students from Minnesota's Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and immigrant communities to slow down, ask questions and think critically about the impact of standardizing one of the most significant tools for liberation in US history: *reading*.

Context: Research at the Haitian Community Center (HCC) in Miami, Florida

As my dissertation found, understanding ways to improve academic achievement must begin by learning about who Minnesota's immigrant communities are, how their US racially-assigned identities impact schooling today, and how these groups define academic success in the first place. In 2010, I lived in Miami, Florida, and worked for Miami-Dade County Public Schools (MDCPS). I was also finishing my doctoral work at the University of Minnesota - Twin Cities where my studies focused on the education experiences of students and families from immigrant backgrounds in the United States (US). This interest came from my own lived experience as a Cambodian American refugee who grew up in public schools in Minnesota. It was reinforced by my middle school teaching experience in Massachusetts with immigrant students from Southeast Asia, Central and South America, and the Caribbean. Throughout my doctoral program, I found that the research pointing to factors leading to the academic achievement of students from these communities were located mostly in theories aligned to *educación* and culturally relevant pedagogy.

While working for MDCPS and volunteering at local community-based organizations, I was given permission to conduct an ethnographic study at the HCC. Themes from initial fieldnotes led me to two questions, "(1) How can an ethnic community-based organization (CBO) help educators and researchers understand *educación*? (2) How can [CBOs] help educators and researchers think more strategically about implementing culturally relevant pedagogy in schools?" (Un, 2013, p. 39). I chose to conduct my research at the HCC instead of MDCPS because I wanted to understand how the process of schooling in the US, including education legislation, impacted spaces designed specifically for culturally relevant practices.

Immigrant education in the US: *Educación* and culturally relevant pedagogy

In studies about US education and immigrant communities, *educación* and education are not the same concept. Moral development and emphasis on family and community values in school is one of the biggest differences between *educación* and education. Whereas education

tends to focus on academic skill development detached from students' cultural assets brought from their communities (Valenzuela, 1999; Valenzuela, 2000; Yosso, 2005), educación emphasizes youths' moral development based on community values equally (Reese, Balzano, Gallimore, & Goldenberg, 1995; Smith-Hefner, 1999; Valenzuela, 1999; Valenzuela, 2000).

According to Reese et al. (1995), educación differs from education in that:

The term invokes additional, nonacademic dimensions, such as learning the difference between right and wrong, respect for parents and others, and correct behavior, which parents view as the base upon which all other learning lies.

(p. 66)

In educación, family and community values are centered in school curricula and discipline policies. In schools where educación is the norm, curricula and policies honor youths' identities and cultural backgrounds. As a result, students are motivated to succeed academically because they view schools as a caring place. Lessons taught in their communities are also validated in the classroom and by the teachers (Valenzuela, 1999). Unaligned school curricula and policies tend to have the opposite effect (Valenzuela, 1999).

Like educación, culturally relevant pedagogy requires teaching academic skills by leveraging the assets that students bring into the classroom. Culturally relevant teachers facilitate knowledge-building in a way that allows students to learn about their own identities and build relationships with classmates and their teachers while thinking critically about the world around them (Ladson-Billings, 2022). Culturally relevant practitioners are learners too. They learn about themselves and the cultures they bring into the design of their lessons. They reflect on the ways that culture shows up in how they deliver their instruction and build relationships with their students and families. In this process, culturally relevant teachers have high academic expectations for their students and themselves. For students to experience this type of teaching, which has proven to lead to academic success (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Valenzuela, 1999), policymakers and school administrators must require and support teachers to teach in culturally relevant ways.

Haitian Participants at the HCC

To study these theories in action, I spent nearly one year learning from Haitian teachers and students at the HCC. Ms. Mesidor and Ms. Assade were the two teachers in this study. Both names are pseudonyms. Ms. Mesidor was in her mid 40s and taught French in MDCPS. Ms.

Assade was in her early 30s and was working on her teaching certification at the time of this study. She was also a permanent substitute in MDCPS. Both teachers worked in schools with large Haitian student populations, are Haitian themselves, and have been the primary teachers in the Youth Development and Leadership program at the HCC for four years.

Nine Haitian youth participants—five boys and four girls—were selected for this study because of their age (older than 9 years) for Institutional Review Board (IRB) purposes, and because their attendance at the HCC was consistent. Three of these students had lived in the US for less than five years. All participants still had family in Haiti and strongly identified as Haitian. All participants were also students in MDCPS. These teachers and students were purposefully selected because they were part of the HCC's community during the summer and academic year programming, so by the time that I began to formally collect data, I had already known them for ten months.

An important point to note about this study is that some of the students and their family members came to this organization after being forced to leave Haiti due to the massive earthquake that devastated the country in January 2010. The HCC not only housed an after school program for school-aged children, ranging from preschool through twelfth grade, but it housed education programs for adults too. The HCC also offered medical care to members of the community who had no other access to healthcare. In other words, the HCC was more than an afterschool program that served children. The HCC was a central part of the Little Haiti community in Miami, especially for Haitians who were granted Temporary Protected Status (TPS) by the US government.

HCC Lesson 1: Racialization impacts academic achievement in US immigrant communities

Like many Haitians who immigrated to the US before the earthquake, the HCC students, teachers and their families found themselves living in a city with a long history of racism. In the mid 1960s, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. “noted Miami’s emerging racial triangle and warned against the pitting of refugees against Blacks in competition for jobs” (Portes & Stepick, 1993, p. 39). During that time, King’s comment reflected Miami’s changing landscape. African American residents, still recovering economically from racist policies including Jim Crow laws, were now competing with non-White immigrants as well.

At the time of my study, Haitians in Miami were overrepresented in low-wage jobs and had the highest poverty rate (11.5 percent) among employed workers (Brookings Institution

Metropolitan Policy Program, 2005; Portes & Stepick, 1993; Stepick et al., 2003). In light of both Black American and Black immigrant communities, Portes and Stepick's (1993) historical study of Miami notes that, "as late as 1982, the Economist observed that 'Miami is not a good city in which to be Black'" (p. 39). After immigration to the US, Haitians were racially placed into the Black pan-racial category with African Americans. This category oversimplified the reality that "a tangle of conflicting and often contradictory perceptions, attitudes, and interactions yielded a confusing scene where racial solidarity alternated with class and ethnic factionalism as well as economic competition" (Portes & Stepick, 1993, p. 178). Even though Haitians were multilingual, mostly non-native English speaking and new to the US, they were often lumped into the same racial category as African Americans because of their skin color.

Because of racialization in the US, Haitians in Miami were a statistically invisible group in public education. On June 8, 2010, for instance, one of Miami's most popular newspapers printed an article titled: "Haitian students now welcome at South Florida schools: In a change from the past, new arrivals from Haiti in South Florida schools are finding a warmer welcome" (Charles, 2010). Compare this title to the U.S. Department of Education's 2010 published report on Florida public schools' state-wide progress (United States Department of Education [ED], 2010) and the question becomes: Who are these Haitian students? Even though there were approximately 125,000 Haitians living in Miami-Dade County alone (United States Census Bureau, 2010), making them the largest West Indian group and second largest visible immigrant group behind Cubans (Brookings Institution Metropolitan Policy Program, 2005), their presence in education data was nearly invisible.

In order to understand how relevant the role of race and racism is among Minnesota's immigrant communities today, we must first ask: Who are Minnesota's immigrant communities? A review of literature in the next section reveals that data identifying immigrant students in Minnesota's schools is not entirely straightforward (MDE, 2025; Minnesota State Demographic Center, 2023). Immigrant students in Minnesota do not always identify as multilingual language learners (MLLs). MLLs are not always immigrant students either. MDE defines MLLs as students learning multiple languages, which may or may not include students who receive English language learning services in school (MDE, 2025). English learners (ELs), on the other hand, are identified by their families and assessment data to need targeted support for English language development in school (MDE, 2025). ELs often identify as members of the BIPOC

community, but some immigrants identify as racially White and may also receive EL services. Racially and linguistically, however, Minnesota's three largest immigrant and MLL groups share similarities. Therefore, this paper uses the identity markers of BIPOC, MLLs, and ELs interchangeably to capture this messy, socially constructed complexity.

Minnesota's immigrant and multilingual communities

Minnesota is home to more than 300 different languages (Minnesota Department of Education, 2025). At the same time, Minnesota's MLLs have historically been underserved in schools. According to MDE (2026), "multilingual learners represent the lowest-performing student group in statewide literacy proficiency rates" (p. 29). Two of the largest groups of non-White students in our schools come from Hispanic or Latinx, and Black or African American families. In aggregate, Hispanic or Latinx children between the ages of birth to 17 years old make up approximately 100,000 individuals in our state (Minnesota State Demographic Center, 2023). Likewise, Black or African-American children from cultural groups outside of the US for this same age range total nearly 60,700 current and future students in Minnesota schools (Minnesota State Demographic Center, 2023).

As an aggregate, the number of multilingual learners in Minnesota is growing. The Minnesota Department of Education's English Learners in Minnesota Report (2025) found that, "In 2025, 876,746 PreK-12 students were enrolled in Minnesota public schools with 91,138 students, or 10% of students identified as English learners" (p. 13). The largest group of English Learners (ELs) are found in our elementary schools (Minnesota Department of Education, 2025). Between the ages of zero to eight years old alone, multilingual children make up 21 percent of this age group. According to a study by WIDA and MDE (2021), "between 2000 and 2015, this population grew by 77 percent in Minnesota, compared to 24 percent growth throughout the United States" (p. 5). Approximately 39% of multilingual children ages three to four years old were enrolled in a pre-kindergarten program in Minnesota (WIDA & MDE, 2021). Grade levels with the three highest MLL populations are concentrated in third, second and fourth grades respectively (MDE, 2025).

Some Minnesota school districts are seeing a larger growth in their multilingual learner population than others. Eleven school districts showed an increased enrollment of ELs (MDE, 2025). According to MDE (2025), "the two largest increases from 2020 to 2025 were in Anoka-Hennepin and Columbia Heights school districts" (MDE, 2025, p. 14). Based on school

districts' reporting of students' home languages to MDE, the top three non-English home languages spoken in Minnesota schools are: 1) Spanish; 2) Somali and 3) Hmong (MDE, 2025).

A recent study in Minnesota found that immigrant and multilingual families want schools to support students' ethnic, cultural and linguistic identity development. A study of some of Minnesota's EL families in early childhood found that families value bilingualism and desire for their children to maintain their home language (WIDA & MDE, 2021). According to this study, "parents value bilingualism, meaning retaining the home language and learning English" (WIDA & MDE, 2021, p. 8). Like the Haitian students and teachers at the HCC, this study found that immigrant families see ethnic and cultural identity development as an important part of their child's academic success (WIDA & MDE, 2021).

Inequitable language practices in school was also a finding in this study (WIDA & MDE, 2021). These parents expressed how assimilation and their child's schools' focus on developing monolingual English speakers prevented cultural identity development for their children. One parent acknowledged the pressure to assimilate to English-only in the classroom for her daughter by stating that, "it did stress her because she was the only Spanish speaker. She would say mommy nobody speaks Spanish...she wanted to be like other children" (WIDA & MDE, 2021, p. 13). Many of the parents in this study talked about how their child's language identity was intimately tied to their families' ethnic identity and history. Their desire for their children to speak their home language(s) and English was tied to academic goals and their children's ability to stay connected to communities in their home country. Above all, it was important for parents to have their families' language honored and viewed as an asset in the classroom.

Education researchers who have studied academic success in contexts similar to Minnesota's native Spanish, Somali and Hmong communities also highlight the important roles that culturally relevant teaching practices and racialization play in students' academic success. Though more studies have been published to highlight these factors (Abdi, 2026; Ibrahim, 2015; Nieto, 2002; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Phong Pa, 2025; Sassi, 2024; Valenzuela, 1999), little has been mentioned about this scholarship in what Minnesota lawmakers and MDE count as scientific or evidence-based research.

Currently, Mexicans represent the third largest cultural group in Minnesota at 3.3% of the population, after those who identified as multiple cultures (3.9%) and White (78.2%) (Minnesota State Demographic Center, 2023). Researchers who study the academic achievement of Mexican

American youth in the US often cite Valenzuela's (1999) study, *Subtractive Schooling: U.S.-Mexican Youth and the Politics of Caring*. Based in Texas, her study found that colorblind education policies and standardized testing practices lead to academic underachievement (Valenzuela, 1999). In her study, she highlights how the difference between aesthetic and authentic care is the difference between students failing in school or excelling academically. In her study, Valenzuela (1999) found that:

Teachers expect students to demonstrate caring about schooling with an abstract, or *aesthetic* commitment to ideas or practices that purportedly lead to achievement. Immigrant and U.S.-born youth, on the other hand, are committed to an *authentic* form of caring that emphasizes relations of reciprocity between teachers and students. (p. 61)

Unlike authentic care, aesthetic care is superficial. Aesthetic care only requires teachers and students to care about schooling as a process of skill-building detached from human relationships and purpose. This type of care is only concerned about things like attendance rates, grades based on completed homework assignments, and standardized test scores. Authentic care, on the other hand, requires that educators and students know each other genuinely to engage in a reciprocal, caring relationship (Noddings, 1988). This type of care allows students to be seen in their humanity, for their hopes and dreams, and is used as a vehicle to encourage students to see education as fulfilling a purpose in their lives and in their community.

After Mexicans, African Americans are the next largest cultural group in Minnesota and are often placed into the same racial category as Black immigrants (Minnesota State Demographic Center, 2023). Similar to my study, a growing number of Minnesota's Black students come from immigrant families. According to a report on Black Minnesotans, "between 2010 and 2021, Minnesota welcomed over 112,000 new foreign-born residents...Africa was the largest and fastest growing continent of origin for immigrants to Minnesota" (DEED, 2023, p. 2). In both contexts, the Haitian and Somali communities' racial identities as Black in the US masks education, economic and healthcare statistics.

Statistics for Black immigrants in Minnesota are similar to what Haitians experienced in Miami. In Florida, the Brookings Institution Metropolitan Policy Program (2005) wrote, "while 16 percent of adults in the U.S. do not have a high school degree, the rate is twice as high in Miami-Dade (32 percent). It is even higher among Haitian adults—53 percent did not have a

high school diploma in Miami-Dade” (p. 7). Likewise, in Minnesota, “Black Minnesotans exhibited lower educational attainment than their White counterparts, with a much higher share of people with less than a high school diploma” (Department of Employment and Economic Development [DEED], 2023, p. 2). Furthermore, inequitable experiences in schools for both communities are linked to predictable socioeconomic disparities as well (Brookings Institution Metropolitan Policy Program, 2005; Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, 2019).

Because of their racialization into a pan-racial Black identity, Somali Minnesotans’ data, like the Haitian community in Florida, is difficult to locate. In Waters’s (1999) study of Black identities in the US she writes, “Americans tend to see race and ethnicity as interchangeable for Black Americans—failing to recognize any ethnic heterogeneity within the racial category of Black” (p. 5). In the Minnesota Report Card’s website for example, clicking on the question “Who are the students?” brings visitors to eight racial identities: American Indian, Asian, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, Other Indigenous Peoples, White, and Two or More Races (<https://rc.education.mn.gov/>).

Meanwhile, those who study the academic success of Somali students in Minnesota point to factors associated with racialization and assimilation to explain education outcomes in this community (Ibrahim, 2015). Like many immigrant groups that came to the US post-1960s, Ibrahim’s (2015) study of Somali Minnesota college students found that:

Assimilation has been much more challenging for people in the [post-1960s immigration] for several reasons: 1) many were involuntarily forced to flee with little else other than their lives from Somalia; 2) many have suffered the multiple traumas of war, loss, torture, family disintegration, geographical dislocation, violence, and personal depredation; 3) many were unprepared for the cultural, educational, and logistical challenges and differences they encountered in the US, such as social stigma...(p. 33).

Other scholars who have studied academic achievement in similar Black immigrant communities in the US also point to factors within the host country that contribute to the group’s academic trajectory (Ogbu, 1998; Waters, 1999).

Ogbu’s (1998) cultural-ecological theory of minority student performance, for instance, theorized that academic underachievement in US minority communities stem from a legacy of discrimination. According to Ogbu (1987), “evidence that this [mis]treatment by society at large and by the schools affects how the minorities perceive and respond to schooling is found in the

autobiographies of many minority individuals, in interviews with minority parents and students, and in public discussions of educational, employment, and other problems facing the minorities” (p. 319). Likewise, the education data of Somali students in Minnesota must be analyzed through the stories of individuals within this community. Careful attention must also be paid to the role that race and discrimination plays in the schooling experiences of Minnesota’s immigrant students. Reliance on testing data alone ignores potential solutions for ways to increase academic success within the Somali Minnesota community. As Ogbu (1998) suggests, the voices of students and families from Minnesota’s Spanish speaking, Somali and Hmong communities must be seen as evidence too.

The racialization process also plays an important role in understanding academic achievement in Southeast Asian communities, like the Hmong Minnesota community (Her, 2014; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Ong, 2003; Pheng Pa, 2025; Reyes, 2007). Ong’s (2003) research with Cambodians experiencing immigration and working toward US citizenship in California, for example, found that their community’s racialization along an ideologically White-Black binary could not be ignored when studying socioeconomic, health and education disparities. According to Ong (2003), “the assigning of racializing labels - model minority, refugee, underclass, welfare mother - is part of the racial classificatory process that...continues to engender ethnicized subjectivity...[and] were first fashioned for Native Americans, then passed on to African Americans during slavery” (p. 13). As in the experience of Native Americans and African Americans, Southeast Asian students are placed into larger, aggregate data sets where their unique identities and experiences then get erased.

For Hmong Minnesotans, a pan-Asian identity perpetuates the myth that all Asians share the same ethnicity, language, culture and are “forever foreigners” (Tuan, 1999). In Tuan’s (1999) ethnographic study of ninety-five third, fourth, and fifth generation Chinese and Japanese ethnics living in northern and southern California, she found that “Whiteness . . . is equated with being American; Asianness is not” (p. 111). In reality, the Asian American category includes approximately 50 different ethnic groups, many of whom can trace their US immigration history back multiple generations (Lee, 2006).

One of the most dangerous stereotypes associated with Asian American racial identity is being a “model minority.” This myth serves to divide racially non-White groups in the US so that BIPOC communities are left to blame themselves for experiencing inadequate healthcare,

education and housing (Ong, 2003). For Hmong in the US, the model minority myth makes the unique experiences of this community invisible, even though they experience higher rates of poverty and lower levels of higher education attainment than many Asian American communities in the US today (Her, 2014).

This pan Asian identity also neglects the fact that language and cultural preservation has been a strength of the Hmong community in Minnesota. Xiong-Lor et al.'s article (2026) explores how this community has been able to navigate colorblind language policies in Minnesota's schools. One of the ways in which Hmong Minnesotans have been able to preserve their culture and language, as a vehicle for academic success, is by placing their children in school-based HMoob language and culture programs established between 2000 and 2015. In Xiong-Lor et al.'s article (2026), they find that:

According to the Minnesota Department of Education Data Center (2025), as of 2023, there were 19,778 school-aged children in Minnesota who identified HMoob as a home language. 11,679 of these children attended nine Minnesota public charter schools or districts (some with multiple school-based options) with elementary and/or middle school HMoob/English dual language immersion programs, HMoob language and culture heritage language course options in middle or high school, or missions to include HMoob-centric curriculum and programming. This means that 59% of HMoob home language children in Minnesota have access to HMoob language and culture education in their school or district (p. 4).

As this example illustrates, cultural identity development is viewed by many Hmong Minnesotans as a key component to academic success. This argument is also made in the theory of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2022). As their article highlights, most Hmong Minnesotans navigate colorblind legislation and English-only schooling practices by enrolling their children in schools that honor and celebrate their Hmong language and culture (Xiong-Lor et al., 2026).

Despite overwhelming scholarship that explains the role that race and racialization play in understanding academic achievement in US schools, the solutions put forth in MDE's (2026) READ Act Implementation Progress Report makes no mention of this factor. The ways in which laws, policies, and schooling practices currently perpetuate these racially and linguistically predictable disparities are also absent from this report. Even though this report uses words like,

“culturally relevant” and “linguistically responsive” it does not provide any meaningful explanation about how this body of research orients their understanding of this legislation (MDE, 2026).

Upon reflection of Minnesota’s READ Act and MDE’s implementation, the absence of any meaningful discussion about race, racism and racialization in Minnesota’s schools is troubling. As highlighted in Grunewald and Nath’s (2019) report, “on average, Minnesota performs well compared with all other states on standardized test scores, graduation rates, and college readiness. However, it has some of the largest gaps in the nation on these measures by race and socioeconomic status” (p. 3). Failure to address the significance of racialization of immigrant students is especially concerning when MDE acknowledges that Minnesota schools are currently failing Minnesota’s multilingual language learners (MDE, 2026).

HCC Lesson 2: Standardizing schools through legislation is an example of a racial project Minnesota’s READ Act

Instead of highlighting the work of scholars who have studied academic achievement in immigrant and multilingual communities, like those mentioned above, proponents of READ Act-type laws argue that lower reading test scores are directly linked to inadequate structured literacy instruction (MDE, 2026). To remedy this, Minnesota’s READ Act was passed in 2023 to standardize reading instruction across the state. The READ Act defines high quality and evidence-based instruction as explicit teaching of skills like phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. The 2023 law also created an implementation partnership between MDE and the University of Minnesota’s Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement (CAREI) to approve curricula and provide professional development to school districts based on this narrow view of reading instruction.

The “Mississippi Miracle”

Nationally, many states have adopted legislation like Minnesota’s READ Act because of the “Mississippi Miracle.” Supporters of READ Act-type legislation across the country claim that the “Mississippi Miracle” proved that a state can rise from 49th in fourth-grade reading (in 2013) to 9th (in 2024) as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading test (Texas Policy Foundation, 2026). Mississippi’s Literacy-Based Promotion Act (LBPA) of 2013 required two significant changes that should feel eerily familiar to Minnesota’s READ Act. For one, Mississippi restructured professional development and requirements for

reading instruction in the early grades. Second, and arguably the most underreported aspect of this legislation, is the retention of students in third grade who are not reading at grade level.

While teacher professional development has been the loudest aspect of these national reading policies, Mississippi's retention policy has been the most silent and significant (Texas Policy Foundation, 2026; Thomas, 2024; Wainer et al., 2026). Students who were not reading at grade-level by third grade were not allowed to take the NAEP reading test in fourth grade (Wainer et al., 2026). Wainer et al. (2026) argues that there was in fact no miracle to Mississippi's reading outcome and that their claim is supported by the state's 2024 NAEP reading scores where Mississippi's eighth grade students tied for 42nd place (out of 53 US states and territories). In another subject area, Mississippi's 2024 NAEP math test also revealed that their fourth and eighth grade students ranked 50th nationally (Wainer et al., 2026). Furthermore, one only has to look at Hattie's (2009) research to understand quickly the negative impact of grade-level retention on students to realize that this data was predictable. Despite data that disputes the "Mississippi Miracle," lawmakers and state departments of education remain enticed by technical, quick-fix solutions to academic underachievement, especially for students who are already historically underserved in US schools.

Simple view of reading

Another important aspect of READ Act-type laws is its simple view of reading. According to Gearin et al. (2022), "the simple view of reading is a theoretical model that describes reading comprehension as the product of decoding ability and linguistic comprehension" (p. 268). In this simple view of reading, the process of decoding and linguistic comprehension makes no mention of the important role of language difference and multilingualism (Delpit, 2008; Nieto, 2002). Without a discussion about linguistics and language difference, decoding ability is treated like a skill that is the same across Minnesota's 300 (plus) different languages (MDE, 2023). In reality, these decoding ability tests are measured using Standard American English (SAE) norms and ignore sounds and speech patterns of non-SAE languages (Burke, 2025; Delpit, 2008).

Instead of being associated with culturally affirming and asset-based scholarship (Delpit, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2022; Nieto, 2002) scholars like Gearin et al. (2022) associate the simple view of reading with studies of dyslexia. Historically, dyslexia was introduced in the late 19th century "to describe word blindness...by the 1910s, researchers and physicians in Europe and the

United States had extended the concepts of word blindness and dyslexia to include congenital reading difficulties” (Gearin et al., 2022, p. 267). Dyslexia refers to a “phonological weakness that blocks decoding, which in turn interferes with word identification” (Tierney & Pearson, 2024, p. 90). The work of neuropsychiatrist Samuel Orton and psychologist Anne Gillingham from the 1930s and 1940s still plays a significant role in this area of study. Orton and Gillingham’s work links foundational reading skill development to brain research, and suggests that “neuroscience research supports a phonics-first approach to reading” (Tierney & Pearson, 2024, p. 89). Select functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) scans have been used to argue that foundational reading skills are associated with certain regions of the brain, and that “activation of those regions might advance learning to read” (Tierney & Pearson, 2024, p. 89). Despite debates about the brain scans used to develop this argument, Orton and Gillingham’s work is still foundational to READ Act-type laws appearing across the country today.

In recent years, neuroscientists have voiced concerns about linking brain scans to classroom pedagogy (Tierney & Pearson, 2024). In one discussion highlighted by Tierney and Pearson (2024), critics of the use of neuroscience to support the Science of Reading state:

As they note, detractors of neuroscience in the Science of Reading (SoR) debates have expressed major concerns, including: 1) The extent to which fMRI’s yield images can or should be viewed as discrete images of learning responses associated with teaching specific foundational skills...2) The reliability of such research, especially considering the difficulty replicating data from brain scans; and 3) The extent to which data from brain scans can serve as evidence or the basis for educational practices” (p. 98).

Recently, neuroscientists have found that cultural contexts and socio-emotional factors also trigger brain activity, therefore, other studies in neuroscience related to learning and development should be considered when analyzing fMRI scans (Tierney & Pearson, 2024). When these studies are included, “then all learning, including learning to read, appears more complex than triggering the phonological processing areas of the brain” (Tierney & Pearson, 2024, p. 95). Despite these debates within the field of neuroscience, laws like Minnesota’s READ Act make no mention of them.

Despite the importance of cultural contexts and socio-emotional responses to brain research, laws like Minnesota’s READ Act treat these studies as if they are non-existent (Tierney & Pearson, 2024). Likewise, the move to ignore the role of student retention in Mississippi’s

fourth grade reading scores could be viewed as part of an intended, or unintended, racial project (Omi & Winant, 1994). According to Omi and Winant (1994):

A racial project can be defined as *racist* if and only if it *creates or reproduces structures of domination based on essentialist categories of race*. Such a definition recognizes the importance of locating racism within a fluid and contested history of racially based social structures and discourses. Thus there can be no timeless and absolute standard for what constitutes racism... (p. 71).

Since the Minnesota READ Act ignores research that points to the importance of race, culture and linguistic difference while maintaining the supremacy of SAE, based mostly on White student norms, I argue that this law creates a racial project by standardizing reading instruction in Minnesota's public schools. By using approved reading screeners based in White SAE to identify students for characteristics of dyslexia, without meaningfully explaining how this law and MDE's implementation addresses issues of racism, language discrimination, and classroom environment as variables that show up in reading data, then the invisibility of this racial project is maintained through school compliance and documented in district literacy plans.

The association between reading and racial projects is not new. In fact, research in the field of reading instruction and education psychology have had a long and complicated relationship with BIPOC communities in the US (Willis, 2019). Willis's (2019) article, published in the Journal of Literacy Research, highlights the role of race and reading in Response to Intervention practices. Additionally, Mayes's (2023) research about the invention of special education in US schools for Black students underscores some of the different ways in which labels were created to divide students along lines of race and socioeconomic status. In his research, Mayes (2023) argues that "compulsory education in the early twentieth century and desegregation in the mid-twentieth century triggered a spatial rearrangement of schools formerly built on racial exclusivity and family privilege" (p. 14). During this time, new disability categories were created and supported by scientific claims in order to explain why some students learned differently than others, and therefore needed to learn in a different environment. Dyslexia, as an area of study connected to reading, also emerged around this time period (Gearin et al., 2022). More importantly, adherence to beliefs about the "Mississippi miracle" and a simple view of reading sits within a familiar racialized history of US schools. In Minnesota, this is especially concerning for elementary schools where multilingual students are concentrated.

Furthermore, I argue that the READ Act is a racial project that harms immigrant and multilingual students in two ways. First, it minimizes the role of critical thinking in academic success and reorients teachers to a simple view of reading. Second, this law creates an image of “good readers” based on White, SAE monolingualism (Burke, 2025). This then reinforces an exclusionary process where non-White, non-SAE students are deemed as deficient without any discussion about language or cultural difference.

Race, exclusion and US laws

The process of distinguishing students who display characteristics of dyslexia from those who do not, based on invisible White SAE testing norms, is reminiscent of how US courts created the concept of race. US courts created the concept of race by constructing their first racial category (Caucasian) through a process of exclusion (Jacobson, 1998). Similar to debates about linking classroom pedagogy to brain scans in reading research (Tierney & Pearson, 2024), US courts once grappled with linking skin color to a White racial identity (Jacobson, 1998). The purpose of constructing the Caucasian identity in US courts during this time was to preserve the rights of the people in this group by denying the rights of those who were excluded. Today in the US, the Caucasian identity is commonly known as the White racial category.

When the White racial category was first created, it did not include all of the same US ethnic groups that are now included today (Jacobson, 1998). Over time, as more brown immigrants moved to the US, other European ethnic groups gained entry into the White racial category (Jacobson, 1998). More specifically, between the 1870s and the 1920s, US courts played an important role in creating the White racial category when immigrants from countries like Afghanistan, Syria and China applied to become naturalized citizens (Jacobson, 1998). According to Jacobson (1998):

In the nation’s legal epistemology of race, the “Caucasian race” traces its origins to *In re Ah Yup* (1878), ‘the first application made by a native Chinaman for naturalization’ in the United States...[Judge] Sawyer’s reasoning in the matter single-handedly established ‘Caucasians’ as a legally recognized racial group. (p. 227).

Like citizenship in the US, race was created to categorize groups of people to efficiently distribute access to resources and social power. Moving forward, racial projects, according to Omi and Winant (1994), are “simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular lines” (p.

56). As researchers in education have noted, US schools have always played a critical role in reinforcing racial projects (Givens, 2025; Mayes, 2023).

For example, White people in the US from wealthier backgrounds once feared the consequence of giving African Americans access to reading and writing. As early as 1819, meetings and assemblies of enslaved people were illegal at schools (Givens, 2025). The teaching of reading and writing was outlawed for this group as well. The state of Virginia's 1819 anti-literacy statute "reflected mechanisms of law and policy based on an understanding of education as an instrument that could be used toward both liberatory and oppressive ends" (Givens, 2025, p. 28). For African Americans, denying access to reading, critical thinking and community identity development was a way to control their subordinate status to White citizens. In the early twentieth century, when African Americans were required to attend school, the invention of disability categories, backed by White American and European education psychologists' pursuit of scientific claims, helped to maintain African Americans' inferior status to White students (American Psychological Association [APA], 2021; Mayes, 2023).

Though different, the US government also viewed reading to be a useful racial project for Native Americans. In 1881, the former Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Carl Schurz, argued that "Indians were confronted with [a] stern alternative: extermination or civilization" (Adams, 1995, p. 15). In the end, the US federal government decided to create a formal schooling system for American Indians based on assimilation using the English language and Whiteness as the standard. The supremacy of English in speaking, reading and writing in Native American boarding schools aimed to strip this group of their Indigenous language and culture, thereby fracturing them from their families and communities as well (Adams, 1995). This social engineering approach was used by the federal government because it was less expensive than killing them in warfare (Adams, 1995).

Viewed this way, Minnesota's educators should be reminded that reading has always been linked to student identity development and critical consciousness, and therefore a threat to Whiteness as a system of invisible power (Lipsitz, 1995). According to Lipsitz (1995):

Whiteness is everywhere in American culture, but it is very hard to see. As Richard Dyer argues, 'White power secures its dominance by seeming not to be anything in particular.' As the unmarked category against which difference is constructed, Whiteness never has to speak its name, never has to acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social

and cultural relations. (p. 369).

To intervene in Whiteness and work against a history of racial projects in schools that started by treating non-White students' identities as deficient, and their cultural communities as something to be dismantled, scholars argue that cultural competence and sociopolitical consciousness are necessary components of effective instruction (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Addressing racism in US schools: Culturally relevant teaching

Researchers like Muhammad (2020), for example, call for historically responsive literacy practices in schools as a way to counter historically oppressive practices. According to Muhammad (2020), "historically responsive literacy authentically draws upon and responds to the histories, identities, and literacy and language practices of students for teaching and learning" (p. 49). Muhammad's (2020) book, *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework* (Muhammad, 2020), illustrates an example of this practice through the history of African American literary societies. Unlike the simple view of reading, African American literary societies served a purpose beyond decoding words. According to Muhammad (2020), "they simultaneously cultivated their minds so that they would be in higher positions to advocate for their rights and create the capacity to provide a better future for Black people throughout the country" (p. 36). In Minnesota's schools today, policies like the READ Act and their simple view of reading, deny students opportunities to build critical thinking skills and shared meaning through reading in order to achieve proficiency in an isolated skill like decoding.

Historically responsive literacy is a theory that builds on the work of Dr. Gloria-Ladson Billings's theory of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Like Muhammad (2020), the literature review in my dissertation also found that culturally relevant teaching is critical for all students, especially students whose academic success is impacted by racism.

Culturally relevant teaching:

...means that teachers use 'students' cultural orientations, background experiences, and ethnic identities as conduits to facilitate their teaching and learning' (Gay, 2002, p.614). Often confused with concepts like multicultural education (Banks, 1993; Erickson, 1987; Gay, 1979), culturally relevant teaching is a 'pedagogy of opposition' (Ladson, Billings, 1992b, p. 314) and centers curricula and instruction directly around the students seated in the classroom (Smith-Maddox, 1999). This teaching method has been argued to be especially beneficial to students from marginalized backgrounds in the U.S. because it

emphasizes high academic standards, critical thinking and problem solving in the context of students' lives... (Un, 2013, p. 27)

Proponents of a simple view of reading might argue that this form of teaching is not scientific because its impact cannot be easily quantified through a single data point from a reading screener. Others might argue that the literature found in my dissertation is outdated. Some may also think that these ideas are no longer relevant because we live in a postracial society.

On the other hand, anyone who attended the biggest North American education research organization's conference in April 2026, known as the American Education Research Association's (AERA) annual meeting, witnessed the ways in which these scholars and their research are even more relevant and heavily cited today. This spring, the theme of AERA's annual meeting was, "Unforgetting Histories and Imagining Futures: Constructing a New Vision for Education Research" (<https://www.aera.net/>). There were more than 2,500 sessions at the annual meeting spanning less than one week. Sessions highlighting the most current education research still cite the scholars in my dissertation (Un, 2013). Similar to scholars who have studied ableist ideology and racialized communities in the US (Mayes, 2023; Willis, 2019), many of today's education researchers warned attendees about the quiet storm of low expectations looming ahead nationally, and the invisibility of scientific racism that supports much of the READ Act-type legislation we see today (Awad et al., 2025; Willis, 2019).

The HCC & Minnesota schools: missed opportunities

In 2010, as Miami's schools worked to raise standardized test scores, schoolwork shifted to test practice for the state's assessments. On the other hand, when there were opportunities to leverage culturally relevant teaching practices, these opportunities were treated as non-academic and unrelated to school. During my study, MDCPS operated under No Child Left Behind's (NCLB) 2001 federal legislation (Dee & Jacob, 2011). MDCP schools were deemed to be failing or succeeding based mostly on Florida's Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) scores. While I worked at MDCPS, I found little to no critique of the role race played in the schools that were deemed to be failing. To support the lowest 19 performing schools (out of 435 schools) in the district, MDCPS created the Education Turnaround Office (ETO) in 2010 (Miami-Dade County Public Schools, 2026). While the district's demographic at that time shows that Black students made up approximately 25% of MDCPS (The Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation, 2011), the schools identified to work with the ETO were often more than 90% Black racially

(<https://www.erstrategies.org/>). All students at the HCC in my study attended an ETO-identified school.

At the HCC, success in school was viewed as a mixture of students' ability to master academic content and perform school-sanctioned behavior. Each day, students entered the after-school classroom with their homework. The most common homework assignments were FCAT practice worksheets. I watched students, families and teachers work together to support this limited view of academic success after school daily. During this work time, students sat at tables, talked about their day in English and Haitian-Creole and spoke with teachers and family members in both languages. While HCC teachers helped students complete their homework, they reinforced the importance of standardized tests.

Simultaneously, HCC students were engaged in sociopolitical leadership activities that they did not view as opportunities for academic skill-building because this type of knowledge was not reflected in their schoolwork. For example, HCC students of all ages worked alongside Haitian adults to participate in protests against the US government's Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) office. In December 2010, for instance, the US announced that it was lifting a ban on deportations to Haiti for individuals with criminal convictions. Deportations of Haitians in South Florida were set to resume in January 2011, which was one year after Haiti's massive earthquake (Center for Constitutional Rights, 2011). During this time, after HCC students completed their school assignments, they created posters and shared stories about relatives and members of their community who faced deportation. For HCC students, their families and the HCC teachers, this move by the US government was just another example of racism that Haitians in Miami were already experiencing.

Instead of spending time on FCAT based homework, I wonder what students at the HCC could have learned by writing to their local representatives about their fears, questions and families' experience? What relationship to reading, writing and critical thinking could have been developed if Haitian students had put their oral stories into writing? How would the HCC teachers have felt by reading the writing of their Haitian students? What deeper connection between students and teachers could have been built through this type of academic exercise?

Fifteen years later, I once again saw how Minnesota's immigrant students attempted to process their community's relationship with public schools and the US government during Operation Metro Surge. According to the City of Minneapolis (2026):

[Operation Metro Surge] began Dec. 1, 2025, and brought more than 4,000 federal agents to Minnesota, causing extreme harm in Minneapolis. This included the deaths of three people and injuries to a number of community members, separated families, loss of the ability to work and pay rent, and a lack of safety when accessing food sources, healthcare and schooling. Although a drawdown was announced in February 2026 and the number of federal agents in the state has since decreased, the consequences of [Operation Metro Surge] continue to shape daily life, community wellbeing, and the city's long-term recovery needs. (p. 3).

During Operation Metro Surge, the presence of xenophobia and racism came as a shock to some Minnesotans. As recent studies have shared, however, Minnesota's immigrant communities have always been aware of racism (Hearst et al., 2021; Ibrahim, 2015) and were reminded of this reality once again during Operation Metro Surge (City of Minneapolis, 2026). During moments like Operation Metro Surge, schools have an opportunity to teach reading skill development, critical thinking and identity development simultaneously, especially with students from immigrant backgrounds. In the face of standardized and colorblind education policies, however, these moments are denied when the weight of classroom time is spent on phonemic awareness in the absence of sociopolitical consciousness.

Sociopolitical consciousness development and critical thinking are necessary skills for students even in the absence of large, traumatic events like Operation Metro Surge. For one, xenophobia and ICE are not new to Minnesota's immigrant communities. In 2016, for instance, many Cambodian Americans in Minnesota joined protests that were organized to support leniency for eight Cambodian Americans who were set to be deported by ICE. The Cambodian American Minnesotans, who later became known as the "Minnesota 8" (<https://minnesota8.org/>), experienced forced deportation and family separation when their lack of US citizenship and misdemeanor offenses that took place when they were minors were used years later to justify their removal back to Cambodia.

Hearst's et al. (2021) study of immigrant and refugee communities in Minnesota, after the murder of George Floyd and in the midst of the COVID pandemic, also found that "immigrant/refugee communities of color in Minneapolis/St. Paul face daily experiences of racism that were compounded by the events of 2020. Discrimination and systemic racism contribute to the persistent health inequities" (p. 1). Today, the children of the Minnesotans

highlighted in these examples have already witnessed fear, confusion, xenophobia and racism firsthand. They take these experiences with them into the classroom whether educators know their stories or not. As studies have shown, these environmental factors play a significant role in the academic outcomes of immigrant students and must not be ignored (Ogbu, 1987; Ong, 2003; Waters, 1999).

Looking back, I am reminded that while we work to implement the READ Act in Minnesota schools, reducing reading experiences to a one-size fits all, standardized structured literacy model is not culturally relevant teaching. Again, if reading instruction is simply about decoding words without sociopolitical consciousness and student identity development, then reading will remain a racial project that is complicit in the perpetuation of Whiteness. MDE's approved reading screeners is an illustration of this point.

HCC Lesson 3: Scientific racism and the pervasiveness of invisible rules

As the lead for our district's ARE department, I must make sense of the testing tools that are required by MDE and Minnesota's laws. While my work takes place in a public school district, my dissertation study reminds me that these actions ripple into community-based organizations like the HCC. More importantly, lessons from the HCC remind Minnesota educators like me that schools are rife with invisible rules that define "good" and "deficient" students. Set against an invisible Black-White racial binary (Ong, 2003), I am also reminded that there is a need to pause and question the validity of the screeners we are required to use because the history of education psychology demands our critique (American Psychological Association, 2021; Delpit, 2002). More specifically, the field of education psychology has historically caused harm to BIPOC communities in pursuit of its identity as a legitimate scientific field of study (American Psychological Association, 2021; Awad et al., 2025).

First, there is an urgent need to question assumptions about objectivity in MDE's approved reading screeners. MDE's approved screeners are DIBELS 8th Edition, FastBridge, and Capti ReadBasix (MDE, 2026). A review of the literature used to build these tools reveals a strong reliance on research about foundational reading skills, taught exclusively in English, without regard to studies related to learning in schools with multilingual students (Amplify, 2019; FastBridge, 2019; ReadBasix, 2024). In contrast, renowned scholars, like African American psychologist Dr. Asa Hilliard, remind us that what we know as standard English is actually a "polyglot language from the remnants of the language of the Celts, Latins, Germanic

Jutes, Angles, Saxons and finally the French” (Delpit, 2002, p. 93). Despite this messy origin, MDE’s approved reading screeners created their norms without any mention of this history (Amplify, 2019; ReadBasix, 2024).

The ignoring of language differences in native English speaking communities across the US, as a result of geographically diverse speech patterns, then creates a facade of “correct” and “incorrect” sounds of English. For example, retained features of different African languages, like the Bantu family of languages from West African nations, found today in many African American communities cause “African American children to be labeled as ‘poor readers,’ ‘dumb’ (low intelligence), or as ‘speech impaired’” when they are tested with these tools (Delpit, 2002, p. 97). The history and origins of language are largely ignored by educators and policymakers who rely on sounds of speech to help them identify students for characteristics of dyslexia. Failure to highlight the history of language difference then treats SAE as if the English language itself has no history. This then creates an invisible essentialized norm by which all students are judged.

Furthermore, Dr. Hilliard questioned the validity of standardized test makers and wrote that they “assume that there is, in general, a unique correct answer to a given question or problem. If there is not a unique answer, if there can be multiple answers, then the scoring and analysis system disintegrates” (Delpit, 2002, p. 99). This argument then calls into question: Why does the READ Act rely so heavily on reading screeners? What culturally and sociolinguistically relevant research did MDE use to approve its three tools?

Scientific racism and MDE’s approved reading screeners

A review of whose data was used to create norms for these tools is important. In DIBELS 8th Edition Technical Manual (2020) report, there were four samples of 12,233 students collected from different parts of the US between 2017 to 2019. Collectively, data from these students were used to calculate DIBELS 8’s percentile ranks. Racially, the breakdown of the students were: 1) 57.5% White; 2) 18.7% Hispanic or Latino; 3) 12.7% Black or African American; 4) 4.9% not reported; 5) 3.4% Multiracial; 6) 2.24% American Indian; and 7) Asian Americans, and Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islanders tied for the smallest group at 0.34%. ELs made up 5.6% of the students in this data set. Information about the number of languages spoken within these racial categories was not even mentioned despite the fact that these students represented 17 different states across the US, ranging from rural to urban centers (Biancarosa et

al., 2020). Despite the importance of different speech patterns within and among language communities across the US, even within a racial category, this study paid no attention to this detail (Biancarosa et al., 2020).

The absence of this information in the development of DIBELS' percentile ranks is in line with proponents of READ Act-type laws. When it comes to sociocultural dimensions of literacy, "the entire domain is simply defined as irrelevant to...the reading process" (Tierney & Pearson, 2024, p. 100). Even as proponents of a simple view of reading acknowledge that the history of writing and print evolved across time to serve sociocultural purposes, they selectively ignore this detail (Tierney & Pearson, 2024). When reading pedagogy disregards sociocultural aspects of language, then tools like DIBELS 8th Edition are allowed to dismiss the cultural identities of the children in their study too.

Capti ReadBasix, on the other hand, created their initial norms from mostly Black students from "a large, urban school district in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States" (Sabatini et al., 2015, p. 10). These students were used to help the predecessor of Capti ReadBasix, Reading Inventory and Scholastic Evaluation (RISE), construct their norms based on the belief that the students in this group were already deficient readers (Sabatini et al., 2015). Their tool was an attempt to help educators determine what skills, based on the simple view of reading, would help these students become proficient readers. The table below illustrates the demographics of the students used to create the initial norms for what is now Capti ReadBasix (Sabatini et al., 2015, p. 10):

Table 2 Grades Tested During Each Wave

Wave	Grades
1. WINSR 2011	6–9
2. FALL 2011	6–9
3. SPRING 2012	6–9
4. FALL 2012	5–10

Table 3 Participant Characteristics: By Grade and Gender

Grade	Total students	Female (%)	Male (%)	Not reported (%)
5	2,947	49.2	50.8	0.0
6	3,540	48.8	51.2	0.1
7	3,477	48.4	51.6	0.1
8	3,114	49.0	51.0	0.1
9	2,885	54.3	45.6	0.1
10	1,420	58.5	41.4	0.1

Table 4 Participant Characteristics: By Grade, Ethnicity, and Race

Grade	Total students	Ethnicity (%)		Race (%)				
		Hispanic/ Latino	American Indian/ Native Alaskan	Asian	Black/ African American	Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander	White	Other/ not reported
5	2,947	5.2	0.1	0.6	87.2	0.1	11.7	0.3
6	3,540	4.3	0.3	1.0	86.0	0.2	12.3	0.2
7	3,477	4.1	0.2	0.8	86.4	0.2	12.2	0.1
8	3,114	3.6	0.3	1.1	86.5	0.3	11.6	0.1
9	2,885	2.3	0.4	1.1	89.3	0.2	8.8	0.1
10	1,420	2.0	0.3	1.7	90.6	0.0	7.3	0.1

According to Capti ReadBasix (2024):

In 2004, Dr. Sabatini joined the Educational Testing Service and began working to create the RISE (Reading Inventory and Scholastic Evaluation) assessment, the predecessor to ReadBasix. This work was spurred by a collaboration with the Strategic Education Research Partnership (SERP), a group that works closely with numerous school districts across the U.S. Those school districts noted that many of their middle school students were arriving at 6th grade with weak reading skills, but the schools were not equipped to identify exactly where their weaknesses were—or what to do about them. RISE was initially designed specifically for middle school students, to give schools the information they needed to help struggling readers. (p. 2).

Despite the testing group being made-up of almost all Black students, there is no question about how this racialized group might have experienced schooling prior to sixth grade (Ogbu, 1987), nor is there any meaningful discussion about the presence or absence of high-leverage strategies (Hattie, 2009) and culturally relevant instruction (Ladson-Billings, 1995). No attention was paid to students' learning environment, community, history, or the voices of their families in this

study (Sabatini et al., 2015). Nor was any attention paid to the ways in which US schools have historically been structured to create these predictable outcomes for Black students (Givens, 2025; Mayes, 2023).

Instead, the literature reviewed to support the development of RISE is focused solely on isolated foundational reading skills and treats curricula as if it is something that should be standardized. Initial studies of RISE indicate that their subtest content framework is based on content that “is modeled on the kinds of academic materials (words, sentences, and passages) that students could encounter in their school curricula, as determined by a review of formal and informal curricular materials targeted for this population” (Sabitini et al., 2015, p. 3). In opposition to culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and historically relevant teaching (Muhammad, 2020), this description of curricula assumes that all materials are equally effective in diverse student communities across the US.

In light of Minnesota’s EL community, Capti ReadBasix’s demographic data also presents a mismatch. A review of additional waves of students tested to contribute to what is now Capti ReadBasix’s more recent norms shows that most students were not English Language Learners (see table below) (Sabitini et al., 2019, p. 9).

Table 4 Participant Characteristics (Phases I and II): By Grade and Limited English Proficiency

Grade	Total students	Receiving English language learner services (%)	Not receiving English language learner services (%)	Exited services within past 2 years (not currently receiving services) (%)
5	20,159	1.6	94.1	4.2
6	37,416	1.4	95.9	2.7
7	36,407	1.2	96.8	2.0
8	33,746	1.1	97.3	1.5
9	26,063	0.8	98.3	0.9
10	10,299	0.9	98.3	0.8

Table 5 Participant Characteristics (Phases I and II): By Grade and Special Education Status

Grade	Total students	Receiving special education services (%)	Not receiving special education services (%)	Code 504 (%)	Exited special education and placed in Code 504 (%)	Exited services within past 2 years (%)
5	20,159	14.9	81.9	1.7	0.1	1.3
6	37,416	16.5	79.9	2.2	0.2	1.1
7	36,407	17.3	79.3	2.2	0.2	1.0
8	33,746	17.2	79.4	2.2	0.2	0.9
9	26,063	16.8	80.3	1.9	0.2	0.9
10	10,299	15.7	81.5	1.7	0.2	0.8

These tables illustrate one reason why the concept of “evidence” in reading research has been viewed with skepticism. According to Willis (2019), “reading research for the remainder of the

century remained moored in a search for discrete cognitive and communicative skills of English-dominant, middle-class, White students that would ensure reading success” (p. 400). Meanwhile, students whose native language is not English, or do not come from communities that are middle to upper class, White and English dominant are already likely to be labeled as deficient when reading tests ignore the role that race and racism plays in their data set (Ogbu, 1987; Willis, 2019).

Education researchers like Burke (2025) call the neglect of this discussion an example of White language supremacy. White language supremacy is, “the U.S. social process that privileges White, middle-class language practices while systematically devaluing other varieties, including African American English and Indigenous languages” (Burke, 2025, p. 1). When reading screeners, like the ones mentioned above, are viewed as valid and reliable, the deficiency of non-native English speaking students becomes the norm. According to Nieto (2002), “the result is that the kinds of interventions provided are patronizing and partial because they are located within a model of diversity as deficit” (Nieto, 2002, p. 71). Again, limiting reading screeners to those few that are mandated by MDE across the state of Minnesota, without questioning the potential harm that can be done to BIPOC communities, serves as a racial project that supports White language supremacy (Burke, 2025).

Moreover, limiting our understanding of students’ reading progress to screeners that have been approved by MDE without questioning how these tools were created perpetuates the invisibility of scientific racism (Willis, 2019). According to Willis (2019), “scientific racism includes notions of merit, objectivity, and science that are used to defend, justify, and maintain White supremacy” (p. 396). FastBridge’s norming studies are similar in that while they attempt to match the sample of the students in their norming studies to the US Census, their studies also rely on data from mostly White students (FastBridge Learning, 2019; Illuminate Education, 2021). Overall, the role of multilingualism, testing bias and scientific racism (Burke, 2025; Delpit, 2008; Nieto, 2002; Mayes, 2023; Willis, 2019) were absent in these reports (Biancarosa et al., 2020; FastBridge Learning, 2019; ReadBasix, 2024).

The neglect of these realities for BIPOC, immigrant and multilingual language learners then perpetuates a system where “students are labeled ‘at risk,’ pulled from core instruction, and routed into remediation” (Burke, 2025, p. 5). Proponents of Minnesota’s READ Act might argue that this aspect of screening is addressed in MDE’s “Screening Guidance Special Populations”

website that reads, “for all grades K-12, READ Act states, ‘reading screeners in English, and in the predominant languages of district students where practicable...The district must use an approved, developmentally appropriate, and culturally responsive screener’”

(<https://education.mn.gov/MDE/dse/READ/scr/specpop>). Since Minnesota’s three largest multilingual language student communities are speakers of Spanish, Somali and Hmong languages, I wonder how many screeners in these languages exist? Even if these screeners exist, how many Minnesota educators would be qualified to administer them in these languages?

One example of how scientific racism and White language supremacy show up in MDE’s approved screeners comes from one of Minnesota’s most racially and linguistically diverse school districts, St. Paul Public Schools (SPPS). Burke (2025) provides an example of SPPS’s data that was submitted in their 2024-2025 local literacy plan to MDE by writing that:

SPPS reports that more than half of K–3 students were flagged with dyslexia characteristics in 2024 (58.5% (K); 48.4% (Grade 1); 61.5% (Grade 2); and 60.5% (Grade 3)). Because most thresholds are SAE-normed and bilingual/dialect-fair norms are often absent, multilingual and racialized students are more likely to be flagged ‘below benchmark’ despite typical development in their program language. (p. 6).

Thus, the practice of normalizing SAE and White middle class norms as the criteria for identifying characteristics of dyslexia ignores longstanding warnings from psychologists of color (Delpit, 2008) and researchers in the field of sociolinguistics (Nieto, 2002).

Treated as objective and neutral, the words “evidence-based” appear in the READ Act over 60 times (Reading to Ensure Academic Development Act, 2025). For example, the READ Act states that, “each district must provide teachers and instructional support staff with the responsibility for teaching reading with training on evidence-based reading instruction that is approved by the Department of Education” (Reading to Ensure Academic Development Act, 2025). MDE’s “Curricular Resources for Tier-1” website defines evidence-based as “the instruction or item described is based on reliable, trustworthy, and valid evidence” (<https://education.mn.gov/MDE/dse/READ/resources/>). This discursive move to justify reading screeners as being based on “evidence,” simply by stating that it is “evidence-based” and ignoring research that calls this into question (Tierney & Pearson, 2024), should cause all Minnesota educators to pause. Minnesota educators interested in academic achievement and equity must ask: What does evidence-based mean in this statute? Whose evidence is considered

valid by MDE and CAREI, and whose is not? Whose perspectives decided that these screeners and these materials were trustworthy? Whose perspectives were absent when this happened?

In reality, language reveals insight into a community's cultural values, priorities, and worldview (Gee, 20025). In this case, the concept of evidence is treated as important and a fact that should be assumed to be true. The use of words like "evidence" and "evidence-based" in Minnesota's READ Act and MDE's implementation falsely leads people to believe that there is only one way to teach reading, and that structured literacy is the solution to racial inequity. As this paper suggests, this view of "evidence" is far from the truth. These words, used in this way, completely ignores the lived experiences of Minnesota's immigrant and BIPOC students, their interests, and assets in our schools.

Transparency and epistemology

At the heart of debates about screening, testing and evidence is the idea of epistemology. Epistemology is defined as "what knowledge is and how it is created" (Awad et al., 2025, p. 290). According to Lather (1992), epistemology refers to "one's philosophy of what it means to know" (p. 92). Deceptively logical, different epistemologies have long competed with privileged forms of knowledge maintained through systems of social stratification (Collins, 2000; Scheurich & Young, 1997) and political battles over what makes research "scientific" (Berliner 2002; Feuer, Towne, & Shavelson, 2002; Burkhardt & Shoenfeld, 2003; Gee, 1999/2005; Lather, 2004; Raudenbush, 2005). Failure to recognize biases in epistemologies may result in epistemological racism, which reinforces Western society's ways of knowing while silencing others (Scheurich & Young, 1997). Moreover, the role of epistemology is often overlooked yet critical for understanding academic achievement. US schools have always been a place where some knowledge systems - mostly middle class, White and Eurocentric - are valued while other cultures' and communities' ways of knowing have been minimized or ignored (Brayboy & Maughan, 2009).

In fact, "foundational theories [in educational psychology] have a basic assumption of universality and generalizability while overlooking or ignoring the role of power, systems, and culture...education in the United States, has been and continues to be a site of institutional racism and violence" (Awad et al., 2025, p. 291). Furthermore, Awad et al. (2025) warns researchers that, "by approaching knowledge production with the mindset that there is one universal truth that can be measured and discovered, this line of thinking ignores and minimizes

how systems of power and oppression impact individuals” (p. 290). Today, universal truths that perpetuate oppression are being reinforced through MDE’s reading screeners, approved curriculum process and professional development vendors. In their apology to people of color, the American Psychological Association (2021), even states, “we know too well that history can repeat itself, that the past informs the present, and that many harms will continue to be perpetuated absent purposeful intervention” (p. 1). At this moment, Minnesota’s policymakers and those implementing READ Act guidelines at MDE have an opportunity to intervene in the perpetuation of scientific racism. One step toward progress could be made by making their collective and individual epistemologies transparent to Minnesota’s schools and communities.

Theory for transparency

Theories used in my dissertation to address issues of validity in ethnographic research would be helpful for Minnesota policymakers and those at MDE and CAREI too. In particular, individuals who are responsible for READ Act revisions and implementation should use poststructural theory, postcolonial theory and feminist theory to explain how their racialized, lived experiences shape their leadership of this work. Poststructural theorists have long argued that words have the power to make themselves true when it is supported by power (Fairclough, 1989/2001; Gee, 1999/2005; Hall, 2001; Rymes, 2009). Because lawmakers and MDE have tremendous power in the enforcement and implementation of the READ Act, the words they use in law and guidance have the ability to make themselves true. Therefore, it would be helpful to know what research backs their view of “evidence” while explaining to schools whose evidence they choose to deny and why.

Postcolonial theory would also be helpful for explaining to Minnesota’s schools and communities how lawmakers and MDE are using legislation, like the READ Act, to intervene in harm against BIPOC communities due to modernism (Bhaba, 1990), colonialism (Said, 1989) and racism (Givens, 2025). For instance, what steps have lawmakers and MDE taken to ensure that the people they choose to work with for READ Act implementation are addressing the racist and colonial history of US schooling? In what ways is their guidance and leadership addressing this history so as not to replicate past practices? It is not sufficient to toss words like “culturally relevant” and “linguistically responsive” into these discussions without explaining how these theories explicitly show up in their work (Ladson-Billings, 1995; MDE, 2026). Without this

transparency, especially for BIPOC communities in Minnesota, the beliefs driving READ Act's creation and implementation remain invisible and reproduce harm.

Feminist scholarship was also helpful during my study because it required me to seek multiple perspectives and position my own biases in my analysis. In addition to issues of transparency, researchers must attend to the ways power dynamics between the researcher and the research shape the study (Kumashiro, 2002; Lather, 1992). Throughout my study, I went back to the data that was being collected and reflected on the biases and lived experiences that I brought into my analysis.

Likewise, policymakers and those working at MDE on READ Act implementation can demonstrate their dedication to transparency by explaining the ways in which their individual identities, lived experiences and research backgrounds impact their decision to approve curriculum, screening tools, and professional development. How do their racial, linguistic, gendered, etc. identities inform the decisions that have been made in READ Act creation and guidance? How might their reflection present blind spots in need of other perspectives? What is their plan to address these blind spots in ways that honor the voices and experiences of Minnesota's BIPOC and immigrant communities? As school leaders, how do we know that these conversations are taking place at the legislative and MDE level? Used for transparency, these theories can help with building trust between legislators, MDE, BIPOC and immigrant communities. On the other hand, the absence of this transparency perpetuates distrust that has roots in the history of US schooling (Givens, 2025; Mayes, 2023).

Beneficiaries of invisible epistemology

Lastly, in a time when funding is tight in most Minnesota school districts, administrators should be asking: Who are the beneficiaries of false objectivity hidden by words like "science" and "evidence"? If miracles like Mississippi's can be debunked so quickly by looking at other well-known studies (Hattie, 2009) and more data associated with Mississippi (Wainer et al., 2026), then why is reading an area that policymakers still try to standardize? According to Burke (2025), "the approval–reimbursement–reporting triad does not prescribe a single program; rather, through eligibility for aid and professional development, it channels adoption and implementation toward a narrow set of vendor-approved materials and training" (p. 7). Although MDE's READ Act implementation report argues that the benefits of this legislation may not be

seen until 2030 (MDE, 2026), it is clear that there are some who are already benefitting from this law.

Because of the approval-reimbursement-reporting triad, there are companies and organizations that already profit from READ Act-type legislation. For instance, “in 2014, the International Dyslexia Association established a campaign to create ‘structured literacy’ as a marketing brand” (Thomas, 2024, p. 17). How much money has been made by companies who have been studying these trends in policy? How are organizations like Decoding Dyslexia benefitting from the sweeping popularity of these laws (Thomas, 2024)? How much growth have the companies that created the three approved reading screeners seen since 2023 in Minnesota alone? What new funding opportunities has CAREI received since their public contract with MDE began? Though it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine the profit margins of various organizations, it is important to note that profit is being made while multilingual students, immigrant students and BIPOC communities continue to be underserved (Grunewald & Nath, 2019; MDE, 2026).

Journalists and podcasters are also profiting from unquestioned narratives about teachers and students from historically underserved communities. Their claims about “evidence” in the Science of Reading (Tierney & Pearson, 2024) often position education as being in a state of perpetual crisis and “simplifies the notion of being a good teacher through stereotypes and dualistic frameworks that overlook task and relational complexity” (Thomas, 2024). When journalists’ and podcasters’ words are taken as truth over the seminal research of scholars of color who have devoted their careers to understanding how to increase the academic achievement of BIPOC students in the US, we replace scholarship and wisdom (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Muhammad, 2020; Ogbu, 1987; Ong, 2003; Valenzuela, 1999) with quick-fix solutions.

While scholars like Ogbu (1987), Valenzuela (1999) and Ladson-Billings (1995) point to the importance of addressing the variables that lead to achievement in immigrant and BIPOC communities, MDE’s implementation plan does not (MDE, 2026). According to MDE’s READ Act Implementation Progress Report (2026), the way to address the academic concern of English language learning students is to collaborate across MDE’s departments and “create a Multilingual Literacy Specialist position...to ensure the selection and alignment of evidence-based, linguistically responsive practices and resources” (p. 30). Moving forward,

school districts should question what MDE means by “linguistically responsive” and whose research they use to determine what counts as meeting this criteria.

Rather than provide these explanations, MDE’s progress report is filled with updates about compliance-based goals. These goals come directly from district literacy plans and include the number of students who have been screened for characteristics of dyslexia with their approved screeners, how many districts currently use state-approved curricula, and how many local literacy plans were submitted to MDE on time (MDE, 2026). The absence of meaningful updates about the ways in which culturally relevant and linguistically responsive practices are being implemented, along with evidence of student learning in MDE’s annual READ Act progress report should be a concern for all Minnesota education leaders (MDE, 2026).

HCC Lesson 4: Hope in Comprehensive Achievement and Civic Readiness (CACR)

Despite laws like the Minnesota READ Act, lessons from the HCC suggest that there is positive work being done to support immigrant and BIPOC students in Minnesota’s schools through other legislation. The evolution of CACR in 2024 illustrates an example of legislation that addresses US history and education theories that honor BIPOC students. CACR’s predecessor, World’s Best Workforce (WBWF) (MDE, n.d.), required each school district to develop a plan that addressed the following five areas: 1) meet school readiness goals; 2) all third grade students achieve grade-level literacy; 3) close academic achievement gaps; 4) all students attain career and college readiness; and 5) all students graduate from high school (MDE, n.d.). In 2024, WBWF was amended to become what is now CACR (Minn. Stat. § 120B.11, 2025). This amendment aimed to support academic achievement from preschool through high school while preparing students to be "active members of their community after graduation" (MDE, n.d.). More specifically, revisions to CACR require Minnesota School Boards to adopt a:

Comprehensive long-term strategic plan...that integrate[s] high-quality instruction, technology, and curriculum that is rigorous, accurate, antiracist, and culturally sustaining...[and] ensure[s] learning and work environments validate, affirm, embrace, and integrate cultural and community strengths for all students, families, and employees. (Minn. Stat. § 120B.12, 2025).

CACR is now more aligned to concepts of educación and culturally relevant pedagogy which is commonly found in research related to academic achievement in US immigrant communities (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Ogbu, 1987; Valenzuela, 1999). Though nuanced, values emphasized

through educación focus on social responsibility (Valenzuela, 1999). In educación, these values are taught explicitly in schools and are reinforced through partnerships between students, teachers, families, and students' entire community. Students are expected to develop into youth who embrace these values. They also expect these values to be present among their educators too. Book knowledge without these values, in the eyes of youths' community and family, leads to Valenzuela's (2000) argument that, "one can therefore . . . [still] be poorly educated" (p. 525). Thus, CACR's requirement that schools support students in developing this relationship with their communities is a step in a culturally affirming direction. Unlike the Haitian students' experience at the HCC, laws like CACR require Minnesota's students to experience a learning environment beyond standardization. Unlike the READ Act and MDE's implementation guidance, words like "culturally sustaining" are mandatory in CACR (Minn. Stat. § 120B.11, 2025) and not treated as a choice made by schools.

Student performance on the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments (MCAs), as outlined in MDE's Performance Level Descriptors (MDE, n.d.), requires teachers to teach reading skills beyond the simple view of reading. Unlike reading screeners, Minnesota's MCA reading test requires teachers to teach students critical thinking skills. According to MDE's requirement to meet proficiency on a third grade reading standard like "Standard 4: Read critically to comprehend, interpret and analyze themes and central ideas in complex literary and informational texts" (MDE, n.d.), students are required to read and think at levels beyond decoding words and sounds. To engage students in this type of learning, CACR reminds educators that instruction should be rigorous and affirm students' cultural and linguistic identities against the backdrop of institutional racism. If MDCPS had emphasized this type of teaching while I was writing my dissertation, I wonder how preparing for academic success could have looked different for Haitian students and teachers at the HCC.

Despite the opportunities presented in CACR, anyone who works in schools knows that time is the most valuable and scarce resource we have. Given this scarcity, the amount of time dedicated to READ Act compliance leads to a confusing and competitive landscape today in many Minnesota classrooms. This is especially true for our youngest learners from multilingual and immigrant communities, and the educators dedicated to creating anti-oppressive learning environments for them.

Conclusion

Every time I sat down to write this paper, I found a way to avoid it. As a school administrator in Minnesota, the thoughts that inspired me to submit a paper proposal have been sitting in my head for the last few years but translating those thoughts into writing was difficult. After months of sitting in reflection about education research, Minnesota's immigrant communities, two statutes currently impacting Minnesota's public schools and the lessons that I have learned from the Haitian community in Miami that inspired this paper, the Minnesota Association of School Administrators (MASA) once again became the gentle nudge I needed. The words that arrived in my inbox read, "Call for Proposals Now Open! This Is the Work. Lead on. Clarity. Courage. Community" (<https://www.mnasa.org>, 2026). These words gave me the clarity to realize that, as a school administrator in Minnesota, I have been *asleep*. Not asleep in my physical body but operating as an administrator in a state of critical unconsciousness (Freire, 2000). In my role, I have ignored lessons that I learned from the Haitian community. I had to acknowledge this reality before I could write this paper.

For the last few years, like many administrators leading schools in Minnesota, I have worked hard to help staff understand and implement requirements directed by MDE. In this compliance process, I have failed to take seriously how my leadership impacts some of the most historically underserved students in our schools. This is especially true for our multilingual learners and immigrant students.

In retrospect, the history of US schooling (Givens, 2025) and the silent covenants surrounding the Supreme Court's 1954 landmark decision of *Brown vs. Board of Education* (Bell, 2004) should have reminded me to slow down and pay attention to the roots of our state's racially predictable practices and data. Scholars like Givens (2025) and Bell (2004) should provide a window for Minnesota's legislators and those at MDE too. Despite the abundance of research written about US schools (Bell, 2004; Givens, 2025; Hattie, 2009), and the history of education psychology as a field of study (American Psychological Association, 2021; Awad & Willis, 2019), laws are still being passed without regard to lessons from our past. In the American Psychological Association's (2021) apology to people of color for perpetuating racism in its field, they acknowledged that "its leadership failed to take concerted action in response to calls from Black psychologists...for an end to the misuse of testing and assessment practices (including standardized assessments) and interventions, in education and the workplace

developed by psychologists and others that perpetuated racial inequality” (p. 3). Today, despite this apology, states like Minnesota continue to pass laws that intentionally use words like “science” and “evidence-based” to push the use of standardized tests grounded in norms that wrongfully assume colorblindness (Awad et al., 2025; Willis, 2019).

Critical theorists like Freire (2000) have long predicted that educators would eventually awake to this realization. According to Freire (2000), “almost always, during the initial stage of struggle, the oppressed, instead of striving for liberation, tend themselves to become oppressors, or ‘sub-oppressors’” (p. 45). Though well-intentioned, I believe that compliance-based leaders like me perpetuate oppressive practices for many students in our communities. Lessons learned in my dissertation highlight a need for future studies about the ways in which legislation like the READ Act impacts BIPOC communities broadly, and immigrant communities in particular.

On the other hand, Freire (2000) offers educators hope by reminding us that, “functionally, oppression is domesticating. To no longer be prey to its force, one must emerge from it and turn upon it. That can be done only by means of the praxis: reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (p. 51). Thus, this paper is my attempt at praxis and my gentle nudge to fellow Minnesota administrators who are also realizing that they too have been *asleep*.

In this paper, the concept of *sleep* is not meant to suggest that any school administrator, policymaker, employee at MDE or staff in schools is willfully harming Minnesota students. I am not suggesting that anyone is trying to hurt the communities they serve. The inability to realize that we have been *asleep*, however, makes Minnesota school administrators, like me, complicit in the perpetuation of the education debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006). As this paper argues, the use of language in the READ Act and MDE’s implementation of this legislation assumes many things (e.g. what counts as scientific, what evidence is trustworthy, how each student from different backgrounds experience schooling in Minnesota, etc.). Although 1954’s *Brown v. Board of Education* may have inspired many educators to believe that standardized reading instruction is permissible because schools are now integrated, Ladson-Billings (2006) argues that “we can point to little evidence that we really gave Brown a chance...[in fact] America’s public schools are more than a decade into resegregation” (p. 9). In her presidential address to AERA, Ladson-Billings (2006) wrote about the education debt that continues to be owed to students

whose epistemologies and lived experiences have largely been ignored in school improvement efforts. She also stated:

Subalterns can and do speak. In this country, they speak from the barrios of Los Angeles and the ghettos of New York. They speak from the reservations of New Mexico and the Chinatown of San Francisco. They speak from the levee breaks of New Orleans where they remind us, as education researchers, that we do not merely have an achievement gap—we have an education debt” (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 10).

Furthermore, I would add the Haitian students and teachers at the HCC to this list of subalterns who have been speaking. The question remains: At what point will their testimonies be viewed as valid, reliable and trustworthy? As a school administrator, educator, parent and refugee here in Minnesota, I argue that this debt is compounded each year by our collective *sleep*. On the other hand, examination of laws like CACR (Minn. Stat. § 120B.11, 2025) through the lens of my dissertation research provides me with hope.

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