

# *Literacy in African American Communities*

*Edited by*

*Joyce L. Harris*

*Alan G. Kamhi • Karen E. Pollock*

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In homage to the scribes who,  
with neither pen nor ink,  
wrote on history's pages  
and on our hearts  
the stories of lives well-lived.

—JLH

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# Foreword

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For the landmark volume *Functions of Language in the Classroom*, edited by Cazden, John, and Hymes (1972), Dell H. Hymes provided an Introduction that has achieved a unique place in the history of this particular genre. In his opening to a volume which is a classic in several fields—linguistics, anthropology, and language education—Hymes laid out fundamental issues that have since dominated the direction of research in the field of sociolinguistics. The majority of scholars concerned with language and education over the past three decades have had to hold their work up against the norms and standards Hymes set out in that lengthy introduction to a collection of papers that went far beyond discussions of language use in classrooms. Aside from his co-editors, Courtney Cazden and Vera John, other central figures in the study of language in social contexts of home, community, and organizations contributed chapters to that volume. Some of the earliest work on “native speakers” of Black English appeared, and seminal papers on varieties of narratives and participant structures for Hawaiian and Native American children were included.

The current volume with its broad representation from researchers in language-related fields provides the incentive to review the issues Hymes put forward as “helpful and hopeful” in their fundamental criticism of the then-current state of language education. Hymes began by chastising linguists for not directly undertaking research on classroom language. In essence, this same criticism still holds today, but the current volume reveals that rather than depending on linguists to do studies of classroom



language, scholars in fields such as communication disorders, as well as reading and language development, have undertaken these and related studies. They have often done so after having been trained in linguistics or applied linguistics. Several chapters of this edited collection are informed by theories from areas of linguistics, such as dialectology, historical linguistics, and phonology, while they also demonstrate direct engagement of the authors in classroom research.

This volume represents in additional ways what the years since 1972 have brought within the study of language in society. Hymes makes the point that before the 1970s, linguists and other scholars of language focused on the structures of speaking rather than the uses of language and therefore made no contributions to our understanding of links between language and learning. He argues that “scholars as citizens” (p. xii) have an obligation to move beyond the study of phonology, morphology, or syntax to understand language as it works in matters having to do with access, opportunity, and tools of mobility. He laments the seemingly apolitical stance of linguists and the failure of other scholars concerned with language to see the possibilities for their work to contribute to policy changes.

Since the Ebonics controversies of the late 1990s, numerous linguists—William Labov, John Baugh, and John Rickford most prominently—have repeated and even expanded Hymes’ cry for social responsibility by linguists. Contributors to the current volume make obvious their sense of social responsibility. These scholars give their attention not only to education as an institution but also to other critical gatekeeping institutions, as well as to communities from which a growing proportion of students come.

The authors here also appear to take up the implications of Hymes’ argument that “authority [also] accrues from mastery of activities and skills, from experience with a variety of language, in a community” (p. xv). The current collection of essays illustrates the importance of locating language varieties within their communities and of respecting the authority of locals over their uses and valuation of these varieties. Again and again these chapters illustrate ways in which speakers draw on a repertoire of genres, styles, and grammatical understandings, while the notion of “standard” relied upon in assessment processes used in formal education ignore range, authenticity, and community validation. Hymes had argued that engaging directly with speakers is the only way to provide the systematic research necessary to make “explicit and objectively systematic what speakers of the language, or members of the community, in a sense already know” (p. xv). Chapters here take this position with respect to topics such as children’s narratives (see Bloome et al., [chap. 3](#), this volume),

ministers' sermons (see Moss, chap. 10, this volume), and young mothers' book reading events (see Hammer, chap. 2, this volume).

An additional point that Hymes makes—the mutual and reciprocal work of the investigated and the investigator—is also evident in many research reports included here. Parents and teachers work together to understand home–school connections, while scholars listen closely to respondents in order to reshape interview questions so as to reflect as accurately as possible attitudes and beliefs community members may not have previously brought to full consciousness.

Much that Hymes and his co-authors advocated in the 1972 volume has come to be not only the guiding rationale but also the central research methodology used by scholars in the several disciplines that address language in use. The lament made in 1972 that there were far too few scholars with a desire to study classrooms does not apply three decades later. Thousands of doctoral students, mature scholars, and teacher-researchers, as well as students across grade levels, can now be found laying claim to being involved in “language research” as they study the language used in textbooks, the media, and across their communities. The “democratization of linguistic and ethnographic approaches” (p. xvii) called for by Hymes has come about in many ways and has been led by schools of education who have embraced such approaches wholeheartedly, if not always with acknowledgment of the value of linking these approaches to their mother disciplines. Discourse analysis, ethnographic interviews, and qualitative methods figure centrally in many research studies undertaken by doctoral students in education departments. Numerous series of books lay out in detail the steps of data collection, analysis, and interpretation for those who undertake such studies. We do not lack studies of the kind that Hymes noted as central in the then emerging subfield of “sociolinguistics.” The current volume reflects not only this fact but also the far-reaching influence of some of the fundamental work in sociolinguistics on language educators in clinical and teaching fields related to language.

However, in spite of the substantial achievements and accumulation of work on language in context over the past three decades, neither the United States nor indeed any system of formal education in the world has managed to leverage sociolinguistic research into educational policy. The notorious cultural lag that standardized tests, textbooks, and teaching practices represent still holds for most classrooms in national and local systems of education. That cognitive and social limits co-occur with the use of languages or dialects, as well as genres, vocabulary choice, and syntactic forms, not sanctioned as “academic” remains the dominant view of educators. The overwhelming evidence that children, and indeed all neurologically normal speakers, have a repertoire of linguistic resources upon

which to draw for social meanings has had almost no impact on the artifacts that support classroom teaching and testing. Moreover, in most societies, the public that claims power over formal systems of education hangs onto the view that the variety of language used is a reflection of fundamental character and intelligence. Hymes made the “terrifyingly simple” statement: “If one rejects a child’s speech, one probably communicates rejection of the child” (p. xxxiii)—hence tossing away any chance of bringing that student to an understanding of choice and the value of expanding his or her repertoire of language varieties. Hymes did not mince words when he pointed out the racism that lies behind the rejection of Black children—and indeed all children of color—and their language structures and uses.

The current volume echoes many of the same points that Hymes made 30 years ago. This volume like that edited by Cazden, John, and Hymes (1972) is helpful; it is however not hopeful as Hymes claimed the 1972 volume was. But before we explore just why it is not hopeful, let us look at some of its means of providing help.

Several chapters demonstrate the extent to which the study of language in its social context and among users of different identities and definitional attribution has expanded beyond children and students. Particularly welcome in this volume are the chapters on adult learners (see Moss, chap. 10; Crowe et al., chap. 11; Meyer et al., chap. 12; Huff & Rogers, chap. 13, this volume) and attention to Black Caribbean communities (see Horner, chap. 5, this volume). This volume also follows through on Hymes’ call for scholars to make obvious that which generally lies well outside the consciousness of speakers and readers. Here attention goes to the many ways in which readers take typographic conventions for granted (see Hartley & Harris, chap. 6, this volume), as well as the means by which text structures aid memory of content material (Meyer et al., chap. 12, this volume). Several chapters engage the history and distribution of patterns of literacy, habits of reading, and controversies surrounding the effects of dialectal variation on reading performance.

Now why is it not hopeful? Nearly every page reminds us that many of the problems outlined by Hymes in 1972 remain with us in full force: the refusal to acknowledge the power of repertoires of language varieties, the dominance of simplified notions of literacy, and the continuation of views that denigrate varieties of English spoken by African Americans. Many of the chapters reiterate findings that have appeared in the pages of sociolinguistics journals and in numerous books that have documented the racist basis of negative valuations of varieties of English used by African Americans. Hymes’ hopes for greater equity, reforms of educational and other institutions through research findings, and improved incorporation of sociolinguistic principles and practices into teachers’ ways of learning have not come about.

Why is this the case? The ready answer comes in broad sweeping, condemning terms—racism, class protectionism, selfishness, and isolationism. But educators and others reading the current volume may find more thought-provoking answers to why there seems an absence of hope these days in another figure from the 1970s—Lawrence Stenhouse. In England in 1970, Stenhouse established the Centre for Applied Research in Education (CARE) with the goal of working with teachers as researchers and as change agents in their schools and communities. Stenhouse believed in the radical power of teacher learning:

The responsibility of teachers, at all levels, is to free students from the insularity of their own minds, prevent them from lodging in the comfortable branches of the teacher's thought, and to try instead to foster a less cautious and confined exploration of knowledge: one that confers on those who seek it, in a spirit of critical enquiry, the power of its use. (Stenhouse in Rudduck & Hopkins, 1985, p. 3)

Essential to Stenhouse and many of those who followed his ideas in Great Britain over the next decades was the view that society could change only if students could engage with teachers who were themselves constantly learning and staying open to ideas and taking risks in their explorations of attitudes and knowledge. Stenhouse found stagnation and protectionism in each generation to be in large part the result of the focus on “training teachers” and instilling pedagogical practice in education rather than fostering a spirit of “enquiry.” He regarded education’s push toward encrusting the professional field with tricks of practice and fixed curricula and narrow goals for student learning as resulting in “the reassurance of certainty to ameliorate the agony of responsibility” (p. 127).

We have far to go before the kind of social responsibility Hymes and Stenhouse called for will begin to match the extent of our study of language in social contexts. High-sounding calls for classrooms and schools to reflect common humanity, the pursuit of wisdom, and the rigors of enquiry have been made again and again. They have not brought change nor are they likely to do so in the face of the rigidity of the structures of organizations and belief systems that hold speakers and their languages in hierarchical layers of separation.

This introduction closes with no repeat of such mighty and distant calls. Instead, it turns to a central tenet of linguistics—*meaning*—often termed simply semantics. None of the chapters of this or any other volume on language use and attitudes among African Americans or any other group of speakers of language varieties will reach beyond being *helpful* to enabling us to be *hopeful* without greater attention to meaning. Readers of this and all similar volumes (see, for example, Baugh, 1999; Mufwene, Rickford,

Bailey, & Baugh, 1998; Pollard & Ajirotutu, 2000) must find it in themselves to represent *meanings* about the knowledge given here to other learners through social interaction. Such meanings clearly extend beyond mere semantics to explorations that take up economic, political, and philosophical matters, as well as new considerations of the sociology of organizations to enable understanding relations among knowledge, position, and voice.

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## Preface

Justifiably, some might ask: “Why another book on literacy in African Americans?” “Hasn't that subject been aired enough, already?” “Haven't we exhausted all original thoughts on this topic?” “What more can be said about the so-called Black–White literacy gap, America's not-so-secret ‘dirty little secret’?” Thoughtful answers to these and similar questions must first accede the existence of an extensive literature exploring issues of language and literacy in African Americans. One must also accede that the intersecting issues of race, culture, history, and literacy produce a juncture of complexity that cannot be easily unsnarled by a single, definitive treatment.

So, in that regard, the creation of another compendium, combining new and formerly expressed ideas on the topic of literacy in African Americans, is entirely appropriate. New scholarship in this area both validates and extends previous work through replication and fresh iteration. One hopes also that readers new to the subject will be enlightened by this late addition to the literature and, further, that the scholars among them will hark back to previous works to arrive at a fuller understanding of past endeavors and to gain a clearer vision of future ones. For knowledge advances in incremental steps, with false starts, dead-ends, and yes, even retraced steps. And so, in pursuit of greater understanding and without further justification, we offer *Literacy in African American Communities*.

At the outset, it is also important to recognize that African Americans are not a homogeneous group. Despite common historical roots and an

ethnocultural identity, African Americans make up many communities and experience a variety of social and psychological realities. Age, religion, socioeconomic status, social affiliations, geographic residence, and even language differences comprise variables that define these communities. It was in recognition of the diversity among African Americans that “communities” was included in this volume’s title.

In a similar vein, this within-group variability extends to individuals’ acceptance, or rejection, of the now widely used term *African American*. Consequently, the interchangeable designations used throughout this volume are not lapses in stylistic consistency; rather, they are a reflection of historical and contemporary preferences for various terms that refer to American-born descendants of enslaved Africans. We request the reader’s acceptance of this variability, keeping in mind that such acceptance might be one of many keys to understanding the complexity of African Americans and their collective reality.

—JLH

# Acknowledgments

In part, this volume is based on papers presented at the 1998 Memphis Research Symposium: Focus on Communication and Literacy in African Americans, the third in a series of biennial research symposia on communication development and disorders in African American children and youth. The 1998 symposium, chaired by Karen Pollock, was the first of the series to include a life-span focus on communication and literacy. The other members of the committee were Mary Berni, Terry Douglas, Deborah Fletcher, Debra Garrett, Joyce Harris, Sharon Hill, Linette Hinton, Lennette Ivy, Iris Johnson, Alan Kamhi, Sandra Laing, Maurice Mendel, Michele Norman, Constance Qualls, Merlin Taylor, and Rebecca Weaver. We gratefully acknowledge the sponsorship of the School of Audiology and Speech-Language Pathology at the University of Memphis and the Office of Special Education Programs in the U.S. Department of Education.

We would also like to thank Sharon E. Moss, American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, and Violet J. Harris, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, for their reviews and insightful comments during the early development of this project.

Finally, to Naomi Silverman, Senior Editor at Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, for her belief in *Literacy in African American Communities* and for her able guidance through the publication process, we say, "Thank you."



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# Introduction

In a society that values and rewards sophisticated levels of literacy, African Americans are among those most disadvantaged by low literacy achievement. Consequently, African Americans—irrespective of age or social circumstance—are often the focus of public discourse about literacy in the United States. Existing literature that deals specifically with literacy in African Americans is typically segmented by age (e.g., school literacy, adult literacy), academic discipline (e.g., education, linguistics), or a particular domain (e.g., computer literacy). It is precisely the case that such fragmentation obscures the tenaciously cyclical nature and spreading consequences of this group's endowment of low literacy. Thus, the casual reader never sees the whole picture, leading to stereotypic notions about the intellectual inadequacy of millions of U.S. citizens.

In an attempt to bring the disparate parts of the picture into clearer focus, the chapters in this volume bring together personal, historical, developmental, and cross-disciplinary vantage points from which to view the influences of cultural socialization on literacy values and practices among many African Americans. Such a broadened perspective allows that the literacy issues pertaining to African Americans are as complex and unique as this group's collective history.

*Literacy in African American Communities* explores both developmental and adult literacy from the perspectives of scholars from education, linguistics, psychology, anthropology, and communication sciences and disorders. The book's opening chapters develop the theme of historical,

social, and cultural influences on the literacy experiences of African Americans. In [chapter 1](#), Constance Dean Qualls surveys the objective and affective faces of literacy by discussing the multiple meanings of literacy and presenting the statistical profiles of African Americans' educational and literacy attainment. As a counterpoint, these data are interspersed with the voices of contemporary African Americans who discuss what literacy means to them. The chapter concludes with a presentation of survey data illustrating the reading habits of a sample of African American adults. In [chapter 2](#), Carol Scheffner Hammer compares the book reading interactions of low- and middle-socioeconomic-status mothers and their children. Based on her ethnographic research, Hammer compares her findings with the data from mainstream mother-child book reading literature. She concludes the chapter with specific suggestions for the early literacy education of African American preschoolers.

In [chapter 3](#), David Bloome, Tempji Champion, Laurie Katz, Mary Beth Morton, and Ramona Muldrow discuss the complementary relationship between narrative and social development as observed in African American preschoolers. Illustrative narrative transcripts bolster their discussion of relevant theories of text structure and narrative development. In [chapter 4](#), Jerrie C. Scott and Cheryl D. Marcus discuss home-school connections, pointing out the need for bidirectional exchanges of information. The authors describe two programs that illustrate the effectiveness of the integration of home and school cultures in literacy education.

In [chapter 5](#), Sherri L. Horner discusses one source of value asynchrony between African Americans and Black Caribbean Americans in regard to education and literacy. The chapter points to the need for further research on this growing population of the African Diaspora. Specific directions are provided for increasing our understanding of this population's literacy behaviors and values. In [chapter 6](#), James Hartley and Joyce L. Harris begin with a brief discussion of reading processes, including the interplay between the reader's skills, intent, and the properties of the text. The focus shifts to a discussion of how typographic practices can either hinder or facilitate reading and writing skill development. The chapter contains many illustrative tables and figures, and suggestions for the development of textual materials.

Alan G. Kamhi and Sandra P. Laing, in [chapter 7](#), contrast the literacy experiences of children from low- and high-print homes and discuss how those differences relate to discrepancies between these children during early literacy instruction. The authors review relevant literature and offer suggestions on how to increase the early literacy experience of African American children in order to increase their readiness for early reading instruction. In [chapter 8](#), Julie A. Washington and Holly K. Craig discuss the role of dialectal variation in the development of early reading skills in

African American children. The authors provide a critical review of the literature on dialect and its role in reading development. The chapter concludes with well-reasoned suggestions for future research. In [chapter 9](#), Noma R. LeMoine provides an overview of the historical development of African American language as a backdrop to understanding the educational and literacy issues of contemporary school-age African Americans. The chapter highlights effective instructional activities for enhancing language and literacy education for these students.

The final chapters of the book explore important aspects of adult literacy. In [chapter 10](#), Beverly J. Moss, based on her ethnographic research, looks at the influence of the African American church, a significant cultural institution, on notions of authorship, authority, and literacy. The chapter provides illustrative transcripts and suggests another important home-school linkage. In [chapter 11](#), Thomas A. Crowe, Marie E. Byrne, and Sue T. Hale provide program descriptions of state, federal, and privately funded “literacy training programs” for adolescents and adults. A review of the relationship of speech and language skills to literacy, as demonstrated by language research, is presented.

In [chapter 12](#), Bonnie J. F. Meyer, Andrew P. Talbot, Leonard W. Poon, and Melissa M. Johnson present a description of a study designed to investigate the effectiveness of a reading comprehension protocol in improving the performance of a sample of older African American women. The authors provide a detailed description of the study, transcripts of the participants’ responses, and discussion of their impressions and conclusion. In [chapter 13](#), Monica M. Huff and Wendy A. Rogers define computer literacy and discuss the pervasiveness of computer tasks (e.g., word processing, Internet access, electronic banking, online database searching) in the day-to-day lives of adults. They provide a review of literature on computer use by adults, with particular focus on research involving African Americans. After presenting the results of comprehensive surveys of computer use, the chapter concludes with recommendations for future research.

In [chapter 14](#), John Baugh reprises themes heard earlier in the volume, again illustrating sociopolitical, sociocultural, and sociolinguistic influences on literacy and education for African Americans. Baugh closes this volume on a cautionary but optimistic note, suggesting that increased parity in educational resource allocation between society’s haves and have-nots can break the cycle of low literacy for African Americans.

– Joyce L. Harris

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# Public and Personal Meanings of Literacy

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As we enter the 21st century, literacy has taken on many different meanings in this highly technological, global society. Like the concept of multiple intelligences, multiple interpretations of what it means to be literate are commonplace, creating something of a “literacy renaissance.” Diverse terms describing different literacy types support this notion. For example, functional literacy, cultural literacy, academic literacy, computer literacy, scientific literacy, and computational literacy are just some of the ways people talk about literacy. Other descriptive referents include music literacy, figurative literacy, art literacy, biblical literacy, numeric literacy, oral literacy, written literacy, family literacy, and street literacy. Considering these seemingly endless variations on the literacy theme, it is easy to conclude that the connotative meanings of literacy are many and varied. Thus, the implications of literacy are far-reaching.

To accommodate the multiple meanings of literacy, denotative meanings of literacy also have undergone change. For example, *Webster's II New College Dictionary* (1995) defines *literacy* as “the quality or state of being literate,” where being *literate* means “one who can read and write; an educated person” (p. 640). The U.S. Congress, in the National Literacy Act of 1991, defined literacy as “an individual’s ability to read, write, and speak in English and compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job and in society, to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge and potential.” Taking the middle ground, the 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey (NAdLitS) defined literacy as “using

printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential."

These characteristic references to and definitions of literacy clearly suggest that one must possess a range of skills, including the ability to speak, read, write, calculate, and solve problems, to be considered literate. In addition, one must be able to meet a certain level of proficiency in each of these areas to successfully compete in today's technologically advanced environment. Although the personal, affective meanings of literacy are just as important as literacy proficiency, these dimensions are less frequently explored.

Thus, the primary focus of this chapter is to discuss meanings of literacy that transcend the traditional associations with "reading, writing, and 'rithmetic." Contemporary African Americans share, in their own words, what literacy means to them. These interwoven personal accounts provide a counterpoint to historical references and existing literacy and educational statistics about African Americans. African Americans will reflect on their encounters with today's literacy demands—which include being able to conduct print-based activities of daily living, participate in lifelong learning, engage in adequate health maintenance and management, and, importantly, to provide literacy role models for future generations. Finally, as a preliminary indication of the content and reading frequency engaged in by contemporary adult African Americans, data from the *Reading History and Habits Survey* (RHHS; Harris & Qualls, 1997) are provided.

## WHAT DOES LITERACY MEAN?

Meanings of literacy are often qualified based on individual interpretations. Furthermore, the meaning is most likely attributed to the functions of literacy, largely derived from one's own individual experiences and perspective as to what literacy means. For example, one individual may refer to a group of musicians playing jazz as being "musically literate," while another individual might say that they are "jazz literate." In both cases, the individuals provide their own interpretation of the type of literacy proficiency the jazz musicians possess. Of importance is the idea that these are subjective interpretations that may or may not be factual, especially, for example, if the musicians cannot read musical notation, or if they are unable to demonstrate the authentic jazz "feel" in their playing.

In spite of individual interpretations of what literacy means, it is generally agreed that certain common factors, such as education, socioeconomic status, and family dynamics, strongly influence beliefs about the significance and essentiality of literacy. Literacy beliefs, in turn, determine literacy practices. Moreover, these factors cross racial-ethnic and cultural

boundaries. Put another way, African Americans, like other racial-ethnic-cultural groups, determine the functional significance of literacy based on their successful negotiation in educational, economic, family, and social contexts. It is not surprising, then, that although anecdotal accounts of what literacy means in African American communities yield a range of introspections, the collective tone of these accounts suggests that literacy is not only important, but is requisite for human existence and “successful” survival. Literacy is powerful—it unifies, separates, liberates.

### **Literacy Brings People Together . . .**

Shortly after I started my doctoral program, I was encouraged to audition for the local symphony chorus. At the time, I wasn’t absolutely certain I wanted to make the time commitment, although I hesitantly followed up. Nevertheless, the audition time was set. When my husband and I arrived at the church where rehearsal was being held, the first thing I was told was that they did not need any more voices. Fine, I thought. Even still, after completing a form describing my musical background and experiences, I was hurriedly escorted by the choral director to a small, quiet room with a piano. I was instructed to sing a series of scales and choral melodies, and then the choral director asked me to read some scored music. Without hesitation, I sight-read the song while at the same time thinking to myself, okay, this will be over in a minute and my husband and I can go home. Well, to my surprise, the choral director jumped up and excitedly said, “You can go upstairs and get your music assignment.” I said, “Now?” He said, “Now.” Then he turned to my husband and said, “You can pick her up at 9 p.m.”

### **Literacy Separates . . .**

An example of how literacy separates people can be found in Alice Walker’s (1990) *The Color Purple*. Celi, the main character, is separated from her sister not only by distance but also because Celi’s husband, Mista’, withheld her sister’s letters from her. Consequently, Celi assumed that her sister had completely turned away from her, and that they would never see each other again. Later, Celi, with the help of her husband’s lover, discovered Mista’s cruel deception, and Celi finds the letters from her sister.

### **Literacy Liberates . . .**

Because of the Black press, many Southern Blacks became aware of economic and other opportunities of which they would not have otherwise known (Marks, 1989). By reading newspapers written by and for Blacks,



many Southern Blacks became liberated—liberated from the low wages and limited employment opportunities in the South. Black-owned and -operated newspapers used various forms of print materials, including written articles, pictures, cartoons, elaborate advertisements, and written music, to lure Southern Blacks to the North to take advantage of more numerous and better economic opportunities.

### **LITERACY PROFILE OF AFRICAN AMERICANS: RESULTS FROM THE 1992 NALS**

Adult literacy continues as a focus of national attention. Despite the fact that literacy demands continue to change, the national goal is that all adults in the United States will be literate by the year 2000. For example, although the overall level of education in the United States has increased, educational and technological advances impose ever greater literacy demands, to such an extent that more and more people are being left behind. A key issue in this regard is the cycle of low literacy, the legacy of forbidden literacy and poor educational opportunities in some groups of African Americans. Low literacy ensures restricted life chances, restricted access to information, restricted employment opportunities (Qualls & Harris, 1998), and restricted involvement in political decision making vis-à-vis voting (Kernell, 1973).

In 1992, the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) of the U.S. Department of Education conducted the first literacy study of its kind ever done in the United States, the NAdLitS (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1993). The literacy skills of more than 26,000 persons age 16 years and older were assessed by either written survey or interview. The population sampled included the general public, persons with disabilities, non-native English speakers, older adults, and prisoners. African Americans and Hispanic Americans were oversampled. Three types of literacy were assessed in the NAdLitS, including prose, document, and quantitative literacy, areas chosen to assess the information-processing skills and strategies used by adults to accomplish a range of literacy goals. Within each literacy type, five proficiency levels (1 = lowest, 5 = highest) were established.

Following is a partial summary of the results from the NAdLitS, with particular emphasis on the literacy status of African Americans. Readers are referred to the executive summary (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1993) for a full report of the survey results.

- Between 40 and 44 million U.S. adults demonstrated proficiencies at the lowest level (Level 1). An interpretation of these results suggests that 21% to 23% of the U.S. population is functionally illiterate.

- African American adults, along with other diverse groups (e.g., Native Americans, Hispanic Americans, etc.), were more likely than Whites to perform in the two lowest levels, a finding that was generally explained by lower levels of education in these groups compared to Whites.
- Adults with lower levels of education were more likely to perform in the lower literacy levels compared to those who had completed high school or who had some postsecondary education. The reported mean educational level for African Americans was 11.6 years.
- With the exception of African Americans, individuals born in the United States outperformed those who were not. In other words, the African Americans surveyed demonstrated proficiencies similar to non-American-born individuals (e.g., individuals born in Spanish-speaking countries).
- Adults in prison were far more likely to demonstrate lower levels of proficiency than individuals in the general population. The significance of this finding is that the incarcerated adults surveyed tended to be younger, less well educated, and from minority backgrounds (approximately 65%). When sex, race–ethnicity, age, and level of education were controlled, overall differences between the prison and household populations were attributed to demographic make-up and educational status (Haigler, Harlow, O'Connor, & Campbell, 1993).
- Adults demonstrating higher levels of literacy were more likely to be employed, worked more, and had higher wages than individuals demonstrating lower levels of proficiencies.
- Compared to middle-aged and younger adults, older adults demonstrated limited literacy proficiency, regardless of race–ethnicity, a finding partially explained by lower levels of education in adults 65 years and older.
- Nearly half (41%–44%) of the adults in the lowest proficiency level were living in poverty, compared with only 4% to 8% of those in the two highest levels. According to the National Center on Education and the Economy (1990), the poverty rate for African American families is about three times that of White families.
- Overall, adults demonstrating higher levels of proficiency were far more likely to vote than were those in the lower levels. Race–ethnicity as a factor in voting was not reported.

The results of the NAdLitS indicate relations between literacy and education level, and between literacy and socioeconomic status. Based on their literacy profiles, some African American adults experience a lower quality of life, have limited employment opportunities, and are less likely