Reading Between the Lines:

K-12 Literacy and Liberation in the Wake of the Minnesota 2023 READ Act

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Chapter One

Framed through abolitionist theory and culturally sustaining pedagogy, this Alternative Planned Paper (APP) critiques Minnesota's 2023 Reading to Ensure Academic Development (READ) Act—a policy that claims to promote literacy equity through structured literacy, early intervention, and culturally responsive instruction. Yet beneath its reformist language lie mechanisms of carceral control: scripted phonics curricula, universal screeners, and rigid proficiency benchmarks that reinscribe White language supremacy, pathologize multilingualism, and reduce student identities to narrow metrics.

Drawing on scholars such as Bettina Love (2019, 2023), Beverly Tatum (2017), and Elena Aydarova (2022, 2023), this paper argues that the READ Act's implementation enacts more than exclusion—it inflicts developmental harm through linguistic assimilation, the internalization of deficit narratives, and what Patricia Williams (1991) terms *spirit murder*. It further interrogates the myth of neutrality within the "Science of Reading" movement, exposing how appeals to objectivity mask racialized assumptions about intelligence, language, and achievement.

Rather than accept these policy constraints, this APP positions educators as critical policy actors capable of refusal, subversion, and transformation. Through an exploration of barriers, disruption, and liberatory assessment, this literature review uplifts educator and community-driven practices. This includes positioning family-authored texts, multilingual storytelling, and portfolio-based assessment as acts of abolitionist resistance. Ultimately, the READ Act is framed not as a settled law but as a contested terrain—one in which students, educators, and communities can push beyond compliance-based equity and co-create liberatory literacy systems rooted in individual, cultural, and communal freedom.

Statement of the Problem: The READ Act and the Politics of Literacy in Minnesota

In the United States, literacy skills are often framed as a gateway to opportunity. However, scholars such as Lisa Delpit (2006) and April Baker-Bell (2020) argue that it frequently functions as a gatekeeping mechanism—upholding White, middle-class norms and marginalizing students based on race, class, and language. In many classrooms, Standard American English (SAE)—what Baker-Bell terms *White language supremacy*—is treated not only as the default, but as the only legitimate form of communication. This devalues the language practices of students who speak African American Vernacular English, Indigenous languages, or multilingual dialects.

These beliefs are not abstract; they are enacted daily in teacher-student interactions. As scholars including Tatum (2017) and Ladson-Billings (1995) note, students of color often experience correction, pressure to assimilate, and disciplinary action for not conforming to dominant language norms. The students' cultural knowledge and expressions of comprehension are routinely disregarded, while compliance with White linguistic standards is framed as the only pathway to academic and future success. These assumptions reveal deeply racialized conventions about who is considered capable of learning and what is considered an acceptable linguistic practice in American society. As Bettina Love (2023) argues, this mindset leads to Black and Brown students experiencing lowered academic expectations, less rigorous instruction, over-disciplining, and inappropriate placement into remedial or special education programs. Such practices funnel students into exclusionary tracks that echo, and intertwine with, the school-to-prison pipeline. In this context, what Patricia Williams (1991) terms *spirit murdering* becomes a

daily reality—the systemic and psychic erasure of identity through educational structures that deny students their full humanity.

These classroom-level harms are not isolated incidents; they reflect broader policy logics embedded in Minnesota's educational system. Despite its progressive reputation and the codification of culturally responsive teaching as state policy (MDE, 2023), Minnesota continues to rank among the lowest nationally in racialized measures of educational equity and standard of living (Mattesich, 2015; Myers, 2018). According to National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data, the reading gap between White fourth graders and their Black and Brown peers has remained above 30 points since 1992—a gap with lasting academic and social consequences. These disparities are not the result of student ability, but of policies that narrowly define success and practices that erase the pluralistic linguistic realities of Minnesota's children.

The 2023 Minnesota READ Act exemplifies these policy failures. Though positioned as a culturally responsive effort to close reading gaps, the Act operationalizes assimilation through structured literacy mandates, universal screeners, and approved curricula. As Camangian (2013) argues, standardized testing and scripted literacy curricula function as extensions of carceral state violence, not neutral measures of ability. These practices enact what he calls "epistemicide"—the systemic erasure of non-dominant knowledge systems—by codifying intelligence and literacy through a narrow, White normative lens. In this way, the READ Act reproduces harm not only through exclusion, but through the active sidelining of culturally rooted literacies and identities.

Yet this harm is not inevitable. Abolitionist minded scholars like bell hooks (1994) and culturally sustaining pedagogists such as Beverly Tatum (2017) offer a radically different vision—one where students, families, and educators resist through joy, community, and language. Paris

and Alim (2017) note that families have long cultivated literacy through sacred texts, oral storytelling, multilingual expression, and intergenerational knowledge-sharing. Educators, too, have the power to disrupt and reimagine these systems—transforming classrooms into spaces where students are affirmed, not corrected; where literacy is relational, not punitive. This literature review, methodologically grounded in abolitionist praxis and culturally sustaining pedagogy explores the following:

1. **Barriers and Opportunities:** What challenges and possibilities exist for implementing abolitionist and culturally responsive teaching within the READ Act, and how do these factors influence student agency, particularly for marginalized learners?
2. **Disruption of Inequities:** How can educators apply abolitionist and culturally sustaining pedagogies within the READ Act to dismantle systemic inequities and foster agency in academics, identity development, and community belonging?
3. **Transformative Assessment:** How can schools design assessment systems aligned with abolitionist and culturally responsive teaching—prioritizing growth, self-reflection, and social responsibility over compliance-driven models?

By grounding this inquiry in both structural critique and liberatory vision, this study seeks not only to expose systemic harm, but to imagine a more just, affirming, and humanizing future for literacy in Minnesota—and beyond.

Importance of the Research: Advancing the COE's Vision, Values, and Commitment

Framed through abolitionist pedagogy and culturally sustaining frameworks, this literature review aligns with the College of Education's (COE) mission (2024) by challenging the linguistic

and epistemic violence embedded in current literacy policy. It advances anti-racist and anti-oppressive literacy practices that not only expose systemic harm but also center joy, resistance, and collective agency as essential to educational transformation.

Abolitionist literacy, as explored in my Alternative Planned Paper (APP), reimagines reading and writing as liberatory acts rooted in cultural belonging, identity affirmation, and intergenerational wisdom—not as tools for remediation, sorting, or carceral control. While critiquing the status quo maintaining mechanisms embedded in the READ Act's implementation —such as universal screeners, White and Eurocentric curricula, and deficit-based assessments— this paper uplifts actionable, community-rooted alternatives. These include oral storytelling, multilingual expression, family-authored texts, and narrative portfolios—practices that affirm students' full humanity and challenge racialized systems of compliance.

In doing so, this APP advances the COE's core values. Ultimately, this literature review contributes to the COE's vision by showing how abolitionist literacy practices resist educational carcerality, challenge White language supremacy, and reimagine reading as a practice of freedom. It invites educators, students, and families into collaborative, justice-driven models of instruction that center joy, belonging, and liberation.

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1. Respecting Diversity & Empowering Learners

The COE's Value of Respecting Diversity implies for affirming students' full linguistic and cultural selves. Yet Minnesota's educational history—shaped by English-only boarding schools and Americanization policies—has long weaponized language as a tool of assimilation and control (Tatum, 2017; Lleras-Muney & Shertzer, 2015). The READ Act continues this legacy by

embedding White language supremacy into its phonics-based instruction and standardized assessments, which pathologize multilingualism and label students as either proficient or deficient. These reductive categorizations often lead to students being tracked into remedial or exclusionary spaces, isolated from their peers and taught to see their home languages as obstacles rather than assets (Camangian, 2013).

As my APP argues, when students are sorted through compliance-based literacy screeners and denied the right to learn through their home cultures and languages, they experience carceral educational structures that police identity, suppress voice, and erode intellectual self-worth (Love, 2019; Beneke et al., 2022). This mirrors what Patricia Williams (1991) terms *spirit murdering*—the psychic and emotional harm inflicted by systems that demand assimilation at the cost of wholeness. By centering student identity, linguistic pluralism, and community-rooted literacies as foundations of learning, abolitionist pedagogy not only challenges these harms—this literature review advances the COE's vision of empowering learners. Rather than punishing difference, abolitionist frameworks affirm brilliance, invite cultural pride, and build classrooms where students are not corrected into assimilation, but recognized in their full humanity.

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2. Fostering Collaboration

The COE's Value of Fostering Collaboration demands that educators recognize families and communities as essential partners in the educational process. Yet the READ Act, like many state-level reforms, fails to meaningfully include the voices of Black, Brown, and immigrant families in literacy decision-making. As Lisa Delpit (2006) explains, the uninvolved parent myth erases the rich educational contributions of families whose literacy practices exist outside

dominant, SAE frameworks. Bettina Love (2019, p 28) further argues that these families are often forced into "educational survival mode," (navigating schools that ignore their knowledge and devalue their participation). In contrast, this APP foregrounds abolitionist approaches that treat collaboration not as consultation but as co-creation. Through storytelling, community-authored texts, and multilingual practices, families and students can reclaim literacy as a space of personal and cultural agency. This model reflects the COE's vision of relational, justice-centered education.

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3. Promoting Reflective Practice & Empowering Learners

To fulfill the COE's commitment to reflective practice, this APP offers abolitionist-aligned assessment alternatives such as student-led conferences, narrative portfolios, and community-rooted performance tasks (García & Wei, 2014). In alignment with culturally sustaining pedagogical classroom practices detailed in Paris and Alim (2017), these approaches center student agency, affirm diverse literacies, and promote self-reflection over compliance. By rejecting deficit framings and reframing literacy as relational and liberatory, educators empower students to engage with reading and writing as tools for personal growth, cultural pride, and social responsibility. In this way, the APP fulfills the COE's vision for reflective, identity-affirming pedagogy that transforms rather than polices learners. It invites educators, students, and families into collaborative, justice-driven models of instruction that center joy, belonging, and liberation.

Methods: Literature Search and Selection

This research draws on empirical evidence from peer-reviewed scholarly sources to answer its guiding questions. To ensure credibility and relevance, sources were primarily selected from

academic journals in education, literacy studies, and social justice pedagogy. Articles were located using Google Scholar, MavScholar, and WorldCat, with MavScholar providing access to full-text, peer-reviewed journal articles.

Key search terms included:

- Pedagogical frameworks: “abolitionist literacy,” “assimilationist literacy,” “culturally sustaining pedagogy,” “anti-racist teaching,” “student agency in literacy.”
- Policy and racial disparities: “READ Act,” “Minnesota literacy policy,” “Minnesota Paradox,” “achievement gap and racial disparities.”
- Literacy debates: “reading wars,” “science of reading,” “phonics.”

Sources were evaluated for currency and rigor, with preference given to research published within the last ten years that incorporated both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. This interdisciplinary analysis provides a comprehensive understanding of how literacy policy intersects with race, class, and power.

Once identified, articles were evaluated based on publication date, ensuring that the research cited was current and relevant to contemporary literacy debates. A preference was given to sources published within the last ten years, particularly those incorporating both qualitative and quantitative data to provide a balanced analysis. Through this process, an interdisciplinary body of work was analyzed to understand how literacy policy intersects with race, class, and power.

Definitions

1. **Abolitionist Teaching**

   “The practice of working in solidarity with communities of color while drawing on the

imagination, creativity, refuse, (re)membering, visionary thinking, healing, rebellious spirit, boldness, determination, and subversiveness of abolitionists to eradicate injustice in and outside of schools" (Love, 2019, p. 2).

2. **Assimilation**

   "Refers to an attempt to blend into the dominant culture as much as possible" (Tatum, 2017, p. 244).

3. **Culturally Responsive Teaching**

   "Culturally responsive teaching is defined as using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively" (Gay, 2000, p. 29).

4. **Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy**

   "Culturally sustaining pedagogy seeks to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling." Culturally sustaining pedagogy encourages pluralism, equity, and justice in education. (Paris & Alim, 2017, p. 1)

5. **Science of Reading**

   A research-based framework emphasizing explicit instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension, grounded in cognitive science. Frequently invoked in the context of the "reading wars," this approach focuses on systematic skill development but may overlook broader social, cultural, and linguistic dimensions of literacy (The Reading League, 2021, p. 6).

Chapter 2

Introduction: The READ Act and the Struggle for Liberatory Literacy

A child sits in a classroom, eyes moving across the page, searching for something familiar—a name, a joke, or lyrics from a lullaby that sounds like home. They're hoping to see themselves and their world reflected, to feel seen and to be important. At home, they speak in a blend of tongues—poetry and prayer, rap lyrics and call and response, the quick turns of Spanglish, Somali, Ojibwe, Hmong. Each word a thread, weaving a growing internal tapestry that connects them to a place of belonging. But in school, these words can be corrected; red-lined; replaced. Teachers may believe that drilling Standard American English (SAE)—even when it stings—is a necessary sacrifice for student success. But as Baker-Bell (2020) notes in her terming of White supremacy language, the hidden racialized curriculum speaks louder to Black, Brown, and multilingual/immigrant students: your voice is wrong, your family's words don't belong here, and your ancestors' ways of knowing and being are not accepted here. This child's story is not an outlier—it's shaped by policy, pedagogy, and an educational system that continues to favor assimilation over affirmation. In this milieu, the application of spirit murder —the systemic erasure of a child's sense of worth and identity— as a concept is not new (Williams, 1991; Love, 2019). In Minnesota, it echoes old "English First," culturally genocidal policies that sought to strip children of their home languages, cultures, and religions in the name of progress and civilization (Tatum, 2017).

And still today, even with good intentions, policies like the Minnesota READ Act are operationalizing erasure, devaluation, and delegitimization of a pluralistic way of being and knowing. As Love (2019) and hooks (2004) remind us, what is lost is not just words—it is power, a positive conception of self, and cultural connection. Many children learn quickly that in order to

succeed in a White world, they must either leave part of themselves behind and assimilate, or learn how to compartmentalize their experience and code switch. As Ladson-Billings (1998) reminds us, these classroom moments are not isolated, they are the everyday echoes of colonialism, racial gatekeeping, and a history that has always policed which voices deserve to be heard.

In response to this enduring harm, it is not enough to just critique policies like the READ Act—we must dream what is possible outside of the logics that shape the Act and the classrooms it will be perpetuated in. This literature review takes up that challenge by exploring the following questions:

- **Challenges and Opportunities:** What challenges and opportunities exist for implementing abolitionist and culturally sustaining teaching within the READ Act, and how do these factors affect student agency—particularly for marginalized students?
- **Disruption of Inequities:** How can educators apply abolitionist and culturally sustaining teaching within the READ Act to disrupt systemic inequities and foster student agency in academics, personal growth, and community belonging?
- **Transformative Assessment:** How can schools develop assessment systems aligned with abolitionist and culturally sustaining teaching principles, prioritizing student growth, self-reflection, and social responsibility over compliance-driven models?

Guided by these questions, this literature review reveals how carceral logics embedded in the Minnesota READ Act sustain racialized gatekeeping and contribute to the erasure or marginalization of students' rich linguistic and cultural identities. Yet this work is not only a critique—it is also a call to reimagine. It advocates for a liberatory, student-centered approach to literacy: one that celebrates the multiplicity of how students speak, learn, and make meaning.

By dismantling, disrupting, and subverting colonial and assimilationist legacies that have long shaped U.S. educational policy, and by honoring language as a site of identity and joy, this review envisions a future in which literacy is not a mechanism of control, but a practice of individual and collective freedom. To understand how literacy can serve simultaneously as a site of oppression and a site of liberation, we must situate it within broader systems of power—philosophical, political, and institutional. Doing so reveals both the barriers and the possibilities within the implementation of the READ Act. The next section directly engages the first research question by examining the structural, pedagogical, and ideological dimensions of the Act that obstruct the implementation of abolitionist and culturally sustaining pedagogies—and, in doing so, constrain student agency, particularly for those most historically and systemically marginalized.

Structural Challenges: Market Logics, Surveillance, and Racial Capitalism

The implementation of the READ Act is deeply embedded within historical and contemporary structures of racial capitalism and carceral logic, presenting significant barriers to liberatory education. By mandating the purchase of "approved" literacy curricula and screening tools as a condition for state funding, the policy reinforces the privatization of public education resources and aligns pedagogical practice with commercial interests (Aydarova, 2023; Love, 2023).

This entanglement of education policy with economic agendas has deep historical roots, seen in federal mandates like No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which accelerated the commodification of education (Love, 2023), and state-level dynamics where curriculum approval becomes politicized and market-driven (LoBue & Douglass, 2023; Brunner, 2013). The READ Act continues this trajectory, channeling public funds toward

private vendors whose primary accountability is often profit, not pedagogical integrity or genuinely equitable outcomes (Aydarova, 2023; Gabriel, 2020).

This market-driven approach transforms educational need into market opportunity. As Goodman and Loveman (1991) note, mandated state purchases represent significant investments, creating pressure for measurable results, typically defined narrowly by standardized test scores. This pressure fuels a system of surveillance, primarily targeting students framed as 'at-risk' – often marginalized students positioned by racial capitalism as needing intensive intervention (Sojoyner, 2016). Frequent, standardized screening identifies these students early and often (Au, 2016), feeding data into a system that mirrors carceral practices of identifying, classifying, and managing 'risky' populations through monitoring and prescribed interventions designed for conformity (Hall, 2020).

Furthermore, this surveillance apparatus is not merely about control; it actively creates markets. Data gathered through mandated screening identifies "gaps" against often racially and linguistically biased norms, quantifying a need for further products – interventions, materials, training, data platforms (Stockman & Nottingham, 2022). This profit motive, operating within a racial capitalist framework benefiting from standardization and the management of racialized "risk," necessitates carceral mechanisms of control and surveillance to ensure product reliability, manage investments, generate ongoing demand, and enforce compliance. These mechanisms reinforce existing racial hierarchies under the guise of objective, evidence-based practice (Vaught, 2011; Camangian, 2013), creating significant structural challenges for educators seeking to implement liberatory, student-centered pedagogies.

Pedagogical & Ideological Challenges: Co-opted Language and Curricular Constraints

Flowing directly from these structural realities are significant pedagogical and ideological challenges. Introduced in 2023, the Minnesota READ Act established the goal of "hav[ing] every Minnesota child reading at or above grade level every year, beginning in kindergarten, and to support multilingual learners and students receiving special education services in achieving their individualized reading goals in order to meet grade level proficiency" (MDE, 2023). According to the Minnesota Department of Education, the Act promotes "evidence-based literacy instruction" that is "explicit, systematic, and culturally responsive," grounded in phonemic awareness, phonics and decoding, spelling, fluency, vocabulary, oral language, and comprehension—each differentiated to meet individual student needs (MDE, 2023).

At first glance, this language appears inclusive and well-intentioned. Its emphasis on differentiation and explicit references to multilingual learners and students with disabilities suggest a commitment to equity. The Act was shaped in part by advocacy from families and educators seeking stronger supports for students with dyslexia and reading challenges (Dyslexia Institute of Minnesota, 2023). For many, it signals long-overdue recognition of diverse learners and the instructional changes needed to address persistent literacy disparities.

However, for culturally sustaining pedagogists such as Django Paris, H. Samy Alim, Patrick Camangian, Nelson Flores, and Jonathan Rosa, the Act's use of terms like *"culturally responsive"* requires deeper interrogation. Within state policy, such language can become an ideological sleight of hand—conflating equity with standardization and ultimately centering assimilation over affirmation. To understand the roots of this tension, it is essential to distinguish between two pedagogical frameworks often invoked in equity discourse: Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP)

and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP). While these approaches are frequently grouped together, they diverge significantly in their orientation toward power, identity, and educational purpose.

CRP vs CSP: A single letter makes a big difference

CRP, as defined by Geneva Gay (2000) and expanded by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995), aims to improve academic outcomes by affirming students' lived experiences and connecting them to curriculum and instruction. It emphasizes representation, relevance, and rigor, and has been framed as a strategy to close opportunity gaps within the current educational system. CRP remains widely adopted in part because it offers a version of equity that appears inclusive while preserving existing structures, making it politically palatable in state and district policies.

However, when CRP is taken up in policy frameworks shaped by standardized assessments and state-mandated curricula, as with the READ Act, it risks becoming a performative gesture layered atop hegemonic practices. Culturally responsive instruction is here paired with rigid screening mandates and state-approved materials, constraining pedagogical flexibility and narrowing the definition of "responsiveness." This creates a contradiction: while differentiation is promoted rhetorically, uniformity is enforced in practice. Responsiveness, in this model, becomes acquiescence—filtered through racial capitalist norms that position White, monolingual, middle-class language practices as the benchmark for literacy.

As a result, in order to get funding, educators may be expected to deliver scripted lessons that reflect Eurocentric norms, even as they are called to honor student diversity. In a Fox9 news article, Educators are raising alarm bells about how the application of culturally responsive pedagogy has some mixed reviews (Hoggard, 2024). They are stating that the approved curriculums

include culturally insensitive content, tokenized portrayals, and curricula dominated by White authors. In a review of literature materials, an anonymous educator is quoted as arguing that some of the books on American Indians spoke about them in the past tense, such as that used by extinction theorists. In that same article, Senator Maye Quade acknowledged that none of the approved curricula met the equity standards intended by the Act. In her thoughts, the focus during initial review was on the mechanics of reading—phonics, vocabulary, fluency—while neglecting the meaning behind those words. Literacy is not simply a technical skill; it is an identity-shaping, meaning-making practice.

In examining the curriculum review conducted by the University of Minnesota's Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement (CAREI), we are offered more than a technical analysis—we are given a window into the priorities and blind spots of our educational system. Each curriculum submitted for state approval is evaluated, in part, for its alignment with culturally responsive pedagogy. But the question remains: culturally responsive to whom? The accompanying spreadsheet attached to CAREI's analysis allows us to track the racial identity of both the curriculum's authors and the characters represented within the texts. In CAREI's analysis, highly rated programs often fall short of meeting culturally responsive standards and overwhelmingly center Whiteness in both content and authorship. For instance, EL Education's 2017 curriculum features 48 percent White characters, with all other racial groups combined making up the remaining 48 percent. The majority of texts are authored and illustrated by White individuals. Similarly, Great Minds PBC's *Wit & Wisdom* curriculum (2023) includes 120 White characters compared to 131 characters of all other races combined and is authored predominantly by White writers—94 out of 116. While there is an increased representation of Black and Brown bodies in

Wit & Wisdom, to people who think that it is significant that there are a majority of non-White characters, it is important to note that historically there has been a dearth of representation for Black and Brown bodies and a centering of White perspectives. Just because White authors are numerically fewer doesn't mean they are structurally marginalized. The critical issue isn't the count, but the centering of worldview. If most of the stories still reflect White cultural norms, perspectives, and ways of knowing—even if written by Black and Brown authors—then Whiteness remains the dominant frame. These patterns suggest that the state's vision of "culturally responsive" instruction continues to uphold Whiteness as the normative standard of literacy. In such contexts, the READ Act's mechanism of tying funding to state-approved curricula lists *enables* the perpetuation of such White-normative materials, despite the Act's culturally responsive language. In this way, CRP becomes a tool of adaptation rather than liberation—a way to help students fit into existing systems of White supremacist language rather than transform those systems to reflect and sustain their full cultural identities.

In contrast, Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP), as theorized by Paris (2012) and Alim, moves beyond cultural inclusion toward cultural preservation and expansion. CSP positions students not as passive recipients of knowledge but as co-constructors whose linguistic and cultural practices are essential to the educational process. It calls on educators to resist assimilationist logics and instead create learning environments rooted in multilingualism, community knowledge, critical consciousness, and identity development.

Where CRP often works within the boundaries of institutional acceptability, CSP as introduced by Paris and Alim (2017) calls those boundaries into question. It challenges dominant definitions of literacy, interrogates whose knowledge is considered legitimate, and reclaims the

right of communities to define success on their own terms. Within the context of the READ Act, this distinction becomes especially urgent. By centering rote skills-based instruction and tying resources to narrowly defined, White-centric curricula, the policy limits educators' ability to enact CSP in meaningful ways. Literacy is reduced to a skill set to be measured and monitored—rather than a living, political, and relational practice embedded in students' lives.

Thus, while the language of cultural responsiveness in the READ Act may appear to signal progress, its implementation within racialized, neoliberal structures renders it insufficient—and, in many cases, incompatible—with the transformative aims of CSP. True cultural responsiveness cannot flourish in systems that pathologize students' home languages, deny their cultural reference points, or restrict pedagogical freedom. If we are to move toward liberatory literacy education, we must not simply invite students to conform to dominant molds—we must reshape those molds entirely, making schools places where diverse cultural ways of knowing are not merely included but understood as vital to the very meaning of education itself.

The reliance on state-approved vendor lists, driven by the market forces and political negotiations inherent in the Act's structure (Aydarova, 2022, 2023; Gabriel, 2020), materializes this challenge. Curricula securing state approval, even when labeled responsive, often perpetuate White normativity. In this context, CRP becomes adaptation, not liberation.

In contrast, CSP (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2017) demands more, calling for the preservation and expansion of students' linguistic and cultural practices, challenging dominant norms, and centering community knowledge and critical consciousness. The READ Act's structure, prioritizing standardized skills and White-centric curricula emerging from market

demands, fundamentally limits educators' ability to enact CSP. It reduces literacy to measurable skills rather than a living, political, relational practice, posing a profound pedagogical challenge.

Constricting Student Agency and Racial Identity

These structural and pedagogical challenges directly impact the development of student agency and racial identity, particularly for marginalized students. The educational environment shaped by the READ Act risks becoming a site of negative racial encounters (Tatum, 1997; 2017) that undermine positive self-concept.

The potential devaluation of home languages and dialects, implicitly or explicitly prioritized by standardized instruction and assessment focused on SAE, sends a damaging message that a core part of a student's identity is deficient (hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1995). This lack of linguistic mirrors (Style, 1988) can force what Tatum (2017) detailed as assimilation, compartmentalization, or oppositional stances, hindering the development of an affirmed racial and cultural identity. Simultaneously, the Act's reliance on standardized screening as surveillance functions as institutional racism when norms are biased. Being constantly measured and labeled "at-risk" communicates inadequacy, potentially leading to internalized negative stereotypes or defensive resistance (Tatum, 2017). This hinders identity exploration and undermines students' sense of capability and belonging.

Furthermore, encountering curriculum primarily as a standardized, market-driven product (Aydarova, 2023), stripped of deep cultural resonance and opportunities for critical inquiry, limits the "mirrors" necessary for identity development (Style, 1988; Muhammad, 2020). It promotes conformity over critical consciousness (Freire, 1970) and the affirmation of diverse identities. In essence, the READ Act's structure risks creating an environment that systematically undermines

positive racial identity formation and restricts student agency by prioritizing standardization, market logic, and surveillance over holistic, culturally sustaining practices.

Pathways for Disruption – Educator Agency and Liberatory Pedagogy

Although the preceding analysis reveals how the Minnesota READ Act risks reinforcing punitive structural, pedagogical, and ideological dimensions within literacy education, educators operating within this system are not powerless. Positioned as critical policy actors, teachers can and do strategically disrupt these constraints. By consciously adopting abolitionist and culturally sustaining pedagogical practices, educators can recenter identity, joy, community, and liberation within literacy classrooms, pushing back against the narrowing impulses of the policy landscape.

Abolitionist Practices that Subvert Carceral Norms

A key pathway for disruption involves implementing abolitionist literacy practices that actively subvert the carceral norms embedded in standardization and surveillance. Such practices intentionally broaden the definition of literacy beyond the confines of state mandates, affirming diverse knowledge systems, multiple ways of expression, and community-rooted literacies often ignored or devalued by official curricula.

One powerful approach involves grounding literacy in community contexts. As noted by Gregory, Long, and Volk (2004), educators can facilitate community-based literacy projects such as oral history collections, multilingual storytelling circles involving elders and families, or participatory action research addressing local issues. These activities directly counter the monolingual, SAE-centric mandates often prioritized by state policy by validating knowledge and communication practices originating outside the formal school structure (McCarty et al., 2014). This aligns with a Freirean praxis (1970) where students are positioned as knowledge creators

whose learning is rooted in their lived realities and cultural contexts, rather than passive recipients of standardized information.

Furthermore, educators disrupt narrow definitions of text by incorporating multimodal and interest-driven materials. Utilizing graphic novels, song lyrics, digital storytelling platforms, spoken word poetry, and social media content challenges the primacy of traditional prose formats often favored in state-approved curricula (Paris & Alim, 2017). This stands in stark contrast to the documented tendency of mandated curriculum lists, like those potentially informing READ Act implementation, to privilege White authors and conventional literary forms, thereby limiting students' points of connection and affirmation. Expanding what counts as 'text' validates students' diverse communicative competencies and interests (Love, 2019).

Critically, affirming students' full linguistic repertoires through translanguaging pedagogies as argued by Flores and Rosa (2015) directly destabilizes English monolingualism as the sole benchmark of literacy achievement. By intentionally creating space for and valuing home languages in classroom discourse and literacy tasks, educators resist the assimilationist logics inherent in policies that implicitly or explicitly center SAE. This practice not only supports academic learning but crucially affirms students' identities and familial connections, resisting the linguistic erasure often enacted by schooling.

Disruption at the Classroom Level

Beyond specific program types, disruption also occurs through educators' intentional, often subtle, acts of pedagogical subversion within the constraints of mandated structures. These teachers engage in tactical modifications to infuse culturally sustaining principles even into potentially rigid frameworks. For example, a required phonics lesson might be intentionally

embedded within a larger dialogue about linguistic diversity or connected to students' home languages. A decoding exercise could be paired with an assignment where students apply those skills to analyze lyrics meaningful to them or to transcribe family oral traditions, connecting mandated skills to lived realities (Muhammad, 2020).

Creative assessments also serve as sites of disruption. Moving beyond standardized tests or traditional essays, educators might allow students to demonstrate literacy competencies through artistic creations, oral presentations, dramatic performances, or digital projects. Such approaches reclaim literacy as a lived, embodied practice, acknowledging multiple forms of intelligence and expression rather than reducing literacy to easily quantifiable, often culturally biased, metrics (Tatum, 2017).

Underpinning these practices is often an explicit commitment among educators to act as "co-conspirators," a framing articulated by Bettina Love (2019). In this role, teachers understand their position not merely as instructors delivering state mandates, but as advocates working in solidarity with students and communities, particularly those marginalized by systemic deficit frameworks. Their pedagogy becomes an act of healing and resistance, aiming to nurture students' critical consciousness and well-being despite operating within potentially harmful systems.

Synthesis Reflection: Reimagining Literacy from Within

These examples illustrate that disruption within constraining policy environments like the READ Act is not merely about refusal; it constitutes a profound reimagining of literacy itself. By strategically centering students' identities, linguistic resources, community connections, and joy, educators actively reclaim literacy as a practice of affirmation, critical inquiry, and freedom. Even

within systems designed to standardize and control, these pedagogical choices demonstrate a commitment to nurturing students as whole beings and fostering literacy as a tool for liberation.

Beyond Compliance – Toward Transformative Assessment

Just as pedagogy can be reimagined, so too can assessment. The READ Act's assessment model, reliant on frequent standardized screening, risks reinforcing the carceral systems of classification and racialized risk management critiqued earlier. Moving towards liberatory literacy education necessitates developing transformative assessment practices that reject this extractive logic. Instead, such approaches embrace relational accountability, critical self-reflection, and holistic growth rooted in students' identities, communities, and lived realities.

Reframing the Problem: Assessment as Surveillance

Before exploring alternatives, it is crucial to reiterate the critique of the assessment paradigm often accompanying policies like the READ Act. Standardized literacy assessments, particularly high-stakes screeners, frequently function as mechanisms of surveillance rather than tools for genuine understanding of student learning (Au, 2016). They tend to uphold White, middle-class, SAE norms as the invisible standard, thereby penalizing linguistic and cultural difference and disproportionately pathologizing Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and multilingual learners as inherently "at-risk" (Sojoyner, 2016). The data generated by these assessments often feed into deficit narratives that, in turn, legitimize the need for further intervention, fueling the intervention-based profit models inherent in the racial capitalist structure of the educational market (Stockman & Nottingham, 2022). This system reduces students to data points within a framework of risk management, obscuring their complex literate lives.

Minnesota's READ Act continues this troubling historical precedent. If students fail the screeners, they may be triggered into exclusionary activities or marked for special education. At this juncture, empirical evidence from Migambi & Neal (2018) highlights significant racial disproportionalities within Minnesota schools. For instance, American Indian students are four times more likely to be labeled with disabilities compared to White peers, and Black students are over six times more likely to be placed in restrictive special education settings, such as federal setting four. Despite American Indian students comprising only 2% of Minnesota's student population, they represent 7% of disciplinary incidents, while Black students, making up 12% of the student body, account for over 42% of such incidents.

In contrast, transformative assessment approaches are grounded in the understanding that learning is a relational, cultural, and liberatory process, not merely a quantifiable metric to be extracted for systemic judgment. Several models align with abolitionist and culturally sustaining principles. Student-led portfolios and conferences, for instance, shift the locus of control, encouraging students to take ownership over documenting and reflecting on their learning journey (Kohn, 2011). This process centers student agency and meaningful self-assessment over passive compliance with external evaluation.

Furthermore, embracing multimodal demonstrations of mastery allows students to showcase their literacy competencies in ways that honor diverse cultural modes of knowing and doing. Recognizing poetry, video creation, oral storytelling, digital collage, community presentations, or artistic responses as valid forms of literate expression moves beyond the limitations of standardized tests and traditional written essays (Au, 2009). This approach validates students' full communicative repertoires.

Even when mandated standardized tests cannot be avoided, educators can engage in practices that contextualize them. This involves explicitly teaching students about the nature and limitations of these tests, framing them as just one narrow data point among many richer indicators of learning, and deliberately avoiding the reification of test scores as definitive measures of a student's worth, intelligence, or identity.

From Surveillance to Relational Accountability

The fundamental shift proposed by abolitionist and culturally sustaining assessment is one from surveillance to relational accountability. Assessment practices should serve the student's growth and self-understanding, not primarily the system's need for classification and control. This involves prioritizing trust, dialogue, and identity development within the assessment process. Instead of extractive measurement focused on deficits, assessment becomes characterized by nurturing feedback loops designed to support learning and critical reflection. This inherently repositions teachers as mentors and collaborators in the learning process, rather than monitors enforcing compliance. Such approaches encourage students to understand literacy not only as a personal skill but also as a political tool for understanding and acting upon their world.

Ultimately, transformative assessment reclaims evaluation as a fundamentally humanizing practice within education. By refusing to reduce complex learning processes and diverse literate identities to simplistic scores, these alternative approaches nurture students' holistic development, critical self-understanding, and capacity for social action. This paradigm shift away from the compliance logic embedded in policies like the READ Act is essential for fostering educational environments where literacy truly becomes a practice of freedom.

Conclusion

While exploring research question 1 revealed how the Minnesota READ Act, viewed through critical lenses, appears structurally designed to standardize, surveil, and potentially erase diverse linguistic and cultural practices, further examination illuminated crucial possibilities for resistance, disruption, and reimagination. They underscore that educators and school communities are not simply passive implementers of policy mandates; they can function as critical policy actors, healers, and co-conspirators in the struggle for educational justice. Through strategic, culturally sustaining pedagogical interventions and transformative, humanizing assessment practices, they demonstrate that another, more liberatory literacy education is not only possible within constraining systems—it is, in many classrooms and communities, already emerging.

Chapter 3: Enacting Liberatory Literacy: Strategies for Application and Transformation

As established in Chapter 2, literacy education extends far beyond basic skills instruction; it profoundly shapes student identity, agency, and their capacity to navigate and resist systemic oppression (Muhammad, 2020; Tatum, 1997). Although the Minnesota READ Act positions itself as promoting equity through evidence-based practices, its heavy reliance on standardized curricula, high-stakes assessments rooted in Standard American English (SAE) norms, and resulting surveillance mechanisms risks reinforcing systems of linguistic and racial marginalization (Baker-Bell, 2020). Chapter 2 looked at how literacy can serve simultaneously as a site of oppression and a site of liberation. It directly engaged the first research question by examining the structural, pedagogical, and ideological dimensions of the READ Act that obstruct the implementation of abolitionist and culturally sustaining pedagogies—and, in doing so, constrain student agency, particularly for those most historically and systemically marginalized.

This chapter bridges critique and action. Moving beyond identifying *what* abolitionist and culturally sustaining practices entail, this section addresses *how* educators, administrators, and communities can actively implement these approaches within the contested terrain shaped by policies like the READ Act. It offers tangible strategies for enacting literacy instruction as a practice rooted in freedom, cultural affirmation, systemic change, and resistance to oppressive educational models, ultimately aiming to transform Minnesota's literacy landscape. A primary arena for this transformation lies in fundamentally redefining classroom literacy instruction itself, moving decisively beyond the constraints of White language supremacy.

Redefining Literacy Instruction Beyond White Language Supremacy

Implementing literacy practices that honor students' diverse linguistic repertoires requires moving beyond the READ Act's intrinsic Standard American English (SAE) default, which risks enacting epistemicide by devaluing students' home languages and cultural knowledge (Camangian, 2013). Educators can intentionally design multimodal, culturally resonant projects that move away from exclusively print-based assignments (Paris & Alim, 2017). Such projects might include spoken word performances addressing social issues, hip-hop narratives reflecting community experiences, digital storytelling documenting family histories, or graphic narratives exploring complex themes (Muhammad, 2020; Paris & Alim, 2017). These projects should incorporate collaboratively developed assessment rubrics that equally value linguistic diversity, critical thinking, cultural relevance, and creativity alongside conventional metrics, explicitly challenging SAE-only standards (Flores & Rosa, 2015). Educators can strategically align these multimodal projects with state standards related to communication and critical thinking to facilitate their inclusion alongside mandated curricula. Beyond specific project designs, educators should build assignments that honor diverse histories and integrate both students' home and community linguistic practices (Gregory, Long, & Volk, 2004; McCarty et al., 2014).

To achieve this deep integration, educators can implement translanguaging strategies (Flores & Rosa, 2015) and honor students' funds of knowledge by conducting respectful, ethnographic-style family interviews or home visits (Gregory, Long, & Volk, 2004; Love, 2019). These efforts help teachers gain insight into students' home literacy practices (Delpit, 2006) and design lessons that allow students to utilize their complete linguistic repertoires for meaning-making and collaboration (Flores & Rosa, 2015; García & Wei, 2014). Classroom environments

should visibly reflect multilingualism through multilingual signage and diverse library collections, reinforcing the value of linguistic diversity (Paris & Alim, 2017). Leveraging the rich insights gained from families allows for the co-creation of more extensive, culturally grounded learning experiences.

Consequently, developing extended cultural literacy projects in collaboration with students, families, and community members offers another powerful avenue for meaningfully centering local cultural heritage and linguistic diversity (Gregory, Long, & Volk, 2004). Projects noted by García & Wei (2014), such as creating bilingual children's books, community oral history archives, or multimedia documentaries about local cultural traditions enable authentic application of literacy skills mandated by state standards, positioning students as knowledge creators rooted in their lived realities (Freire, 1970). While these classroom-level initiatives are crucial, sustaining such shifts toward linguistic justice requires broader institutional support and leadership.

Administrators, therefore, play a critical role by actively fostering whole-school multilingual ecologies. They can champion initiatives such as multilingual family literacy nights, creating multilingual signage, ensuring diverse library collections (Paris & Alim, 2017), and celebrating cultural and linguistic diversity through school-wide events, explicitly countering assimilationist pressures (Tatum, 2017) inherent not only in curriculum choices but also profoundly embedded within assessment practices (Au, 2016).

Abolishing Deficit-Based Assessment Practices

Just as instruction must be redefined to honor student identities, so too must assessment practices be fundamentally reimagined to move beyond the deficit-based models perpetuated by the READ Act's reliance on standardized tests (Tatum, 2017). These tests often perpetuate deficit

views, narrowly defining literacy and disproportionately harming students from marginalized backgrounds by failing to capture the full scope of their abilities (Sojoyner, 2016; Au, 2016).

Transforming assessment requires practices that are holistic, growth-oriented, culturally responsive, and humanizing (Love, 2019). Educators can develop rich portfolio and performance-based systems, documenting literacy growth through diverse artifacts such as written pieces, audio storytelling, video presentations, and multimedia compositions (Kohn, 2011; Au, 2009).

Performance-based tasks, including debates, presentations, and dramatic interpretations, can authentically showcase students' comprehension and communication skills (Au, 2009). Portfolios and performance assessments provide richer, more complete data than standardized tests, advocating their inclusion in official reporting (Kohn, 2011). While portfolios offer rich data across grade levels, specific approaches are particularly valuable for younger learners.

Specifically, play-based and oral assessments, particularly effective in early childhood settings, allow educators to observe emergent literacy skills, comprehension, and narrative abilities in culturally sensitive, low-stakes contexts. Educators can document these observations systematically, providing formative data that standardized assessments frequently overlook (Au, 2016). Beyond diversifying teacher-led assessment methods, fostering student agency within the assessment process itself is crucial for developing critical consciousness (Freire, 1970).

Integrating student self-assessment and peer feedback practices directly cultivate this agency and critical consciousness regarding literacy development (Kohn, 2011). Students can regularly reflect on their literacy processes through journals and structured peer critique, aligning with standards related to metacognition and collaboration. However, empowering students individually

must be coupled with broader systemic efforts to ensure assessment equity (Au, 2016; Sojoyner, 2016).

Therefore, systemic advocacy for assessment policy shifts is essential (Au, 2009), alongside building authentic partnerships with families to ensure that assessment practices recognize home-based literacies (Gregory, Long, & Volk, 2004) and challenge deficit-based interpretations of student performance (Delpit, 2006). Successfully advocating for and implementing such changes hinges upon educators recognizing and actively embracing their roles as agents of change within the educational system.

Educators as Critical Policy Actors: Enacting Agency and Resistance

Recognizing that teachers and administrators are critical actors who interpret and enact policy daily is foundational to resisting harmful practices and advancing liberatory education (Love, 2019, 2023). Schools and districts must invest in sustained anti-racist and abolitionist professional development focused on racial literacy, linguistic justice, culturally sustaining pedagogies (Paris & Alim, 2017), and abolitionist frameworks (Love, 2019). This professional development should equip educators to recognize, critique, and challenge systemic inequities embedded in curricula, assessments, and policies (hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1995), fostering collaborative and transformative practices. Equipped with this critical consciousness from ongoing professional development (Freire, 1970), educators are better prepared to navigate and challenge classroom-level constraints.

One key application of this professional agency involves educators strategically disrupting the linguistic and curricular surveillance often mandated by policy (Au, 2016; Sojoyner, 2016). This means creating classroom spaces where diverse language practices are valued (Flores & Rosa,

2015), supplementing mandated curricula with culturally affirming texts (Paris & Alim, 2017; Muhammad, 2020), critically analyzing required materials with students, and using phonics time efficiently to integrate context-embedded literacy experiences (Muhammad, 2020). Such individual and collective classroom resistance gains exponential power and sustainability when connected to broader, authentic community partnerships.

Thus, building authentic school-community collaborations becomes vital for co-designing literacy curricula, assessment practices, and policies reflecting community values, linguistic assets, and cultural knowledge (Gregory, Long, & Volk, 2004; Freire, 1970). Building genuine partnerships with families and community organizations requires trust, shared power, and administrative support (Love, 2019; Delpit, 2006).

Conclusion - Reclaiming Literacy as Freedom Work

This Alternative Planned Paper has critically examined Minnesota's 2023 Reading to Ensure Academic Development (READ) Act, arguing that despite its stated goals of promoting literacy equity, its operational mechanisms risk reinforcing the very inequities it purports to solve. Framed through abolitionist theory and culturally sustaining pedagogy, this analysis has revealed how the Act's reliance on standardized curricula, universal screeners rooted in White language supremacy, and market-driven logics functions as a potential site of carceral control—pathologizing multilingualism, reducing student identities, and perpetuating the systemic harm Patricia Williams terms spirit murder. The interrogation of the Science of Reading movement further exposed how appeals to neutrality can mask deeply embedded racialized assumptions about language and intelligence.

However, this paper has argued forcefully that policy mandates, even those seemingly rigid and prescriptive, do not represent a foregone conclusion. Instead, the READ Act exists on a contested terrain where educators, students, and communities retain agency. Synthesizing insights from scholars like Bettina Love, April Baker-Bell, Django Paris, and H. Samy Alim, this work illuminated pathways for resistance and transformation. It demonstrated how educators, acting as critical policy actors and co-conspirators, can disrupt carceral norms by implementing abolitionist and culturally sustaining practices. This involves strategically subverting standardization through multimodal literacies, valuing students' full linguistic repertoires via translanguaging, centering community knowledge, and fostering critical consciousness. Furthermore, this APP underscored the necessity of moving beyond deficit-based surveillance by embracing transformative assessment models—such as portfolios, performance tasks, and student self-reflection—that honor holistic growth and diverse ways of knowing.

The implications of this analysis extend beyond Minnesota's borders, offering critical considerations for any educational system grappling with standardized reforms. It calls for a fundamental shift in how literacy education is conceived, funded, and enacted—moving away from compliance-driven models toward policies and practices that explicitly affirm linguistic and cultural pluralism. This requires sustained investment in anti-racist professional development for educators, genuine power-sharing collaborations with families and communities, and a reimagining of teacher education programs to center principles of equity, justice, and liberation.

Ultimately, the challenge posed by the READ Act is not merely technical but profoundly ethical and political. It compels us to ask: What is the true purpose of literacy education in a diverse democracy? This paper contends that the answer lies not in assimilation or standardization,

but in cultivating spaces where every student's voice, language, identity, and genius are recognized, nurtured, and sustained. Reading and writing must be reclaimed from mechanisms of control and embraced as practices of freedom—tools for critical inquiry, cultural affirmation, community building, and collective dreaming. Enacting this vision requires courage, collaboration, and an unwavering commitment to doing more than survive; it demands the collective will to build literacy systems truly rooted in joy, humanity, and liberation for all Minnesota's children.

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