

Gabriella Matera

Professor Barnes

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Analyses of Literacy Tests

For this project, I chose option 5, “Analysis of Literacy tests”. This assignment has allowed me to not only research and understand what literacy was, but it allowed me to know why, how, and when they were created and what they were used for. It also allowed me to take a closer look at the results of 5 people of different, gender, race and even age groups. First, I needed to understand what exactly I wanted to gain out of this, so I also took the test. Once I gathered up all the results, I was able to speak with each person and get their thoughts and feeling about taking the test and how they felt during and after it. Literacy is not just being able to read, it is also having the ability to understand and have knowledge in different areas. It gives us access to information that we all need.

Literacy tests were introduced in 1890. After the Civil War, many states started to use these tests as a requirement for voting. The main purpose was that they could exclude people with minimal literacy, which tended to be poor African Americans, from being able to vote. The American Federation of labor is the one who took the lead in promoting these tests. Of course, these tests were mostly given to voters of color and were scored by biased judges. The states were officially allowed to give the test to anyone who was not able to prove that they had an education past fifth grade, but it was very clear that they were mostly given to black voters. In 1965, they finally signed a law by President John that outlawed discriminatory voting practices

that were adopted in many of the Southern states. This law included literacy tests, and these types of tests were ruled unconstitutional. If you think about it, this test totally violated the 15th amendment of the right to vote. The literacy test that I chose to give was one that was very common and used often. I am adding the link if anyone would like to try it out

<https://allthatinteresting.com/voting-literacy-test>.

After I gathered up all my information on what exactly these tests were and what they meant, especially to African American communities, I started to give the test out to 5 different people. My goal was to see what their experiences were like taking this test. I wanted to see how they felt before, during, and after as well as did they feel that there was cultural bias in the way that the test was structured. I also want to try and prove the point that we all know that these tests did affect mainly African Americans, but also affected others they felt had diminishing access to education. While I did mention that I did have different ages and genders take this test, I also had college and non-college graduates also, just to get their takes on the test. My first participant was a young African American male, 25 years of age who is currently in his last semester of college and starting the Police Academy at the beginning of the New Year. He said he felt that the test right off the bat was a little biased. The instructions started off by saying “This test is to be given to anyone who cannot prove a 5th-grade education”. How do they even determine that before giving out this test? It was also a time test and only allowed 10 minutes, so he said he felt rushed. While the questions did not seem all that difficult, he said that some questions were to mark an X, cross out, or draw a line around. It seemed that they kept mixing it up so that people would trip up as they felt rushed with the time. He also said he could see how people who may not be a high education or be able to speak the language may have a difficult time taking this test. The test seemed to be confusing. While he did finish in the 10 minutes, he admitted that he

rushed through some of them. As we went over the results, we could see that some of the questions, he messed up on, were because they switched up from draw or circle.

My second participant was a 75-year-old female. Yes, 75! She was out of the test-taking game for a long time now. After she took the test, which she was not able to finish in 10 minutes, she also felt rushed. She said, and I quote, “This test is absolutely ridiculous”! She felt the test was so convoluted and really just made no sense, and wondered why this nonsense as she called it was used to stop people from voting. As we discussed, we both felt it was just a tactic to prevent a certain type of person from voting. She said, “When you are rushing to try and complete the test, you do not realize some of the questions you skipped, or answered incorrectly, were actually not hard at all”. As I continued on to my 3rd person, who was a 24-year-old college graduate female, I began to see a pattern forming with their reflections on the test. She said, “Wow, this test is so stupid”. There were no questions about anything relating at all that they could possibly link to voting. It was just a bunch of random crazy questions that were designed to trip you up. There was literally no rhyme or reason to the test and it sure did not seem that it would have been something that would be sued regarding voting. My 4th participant was a 10-year-old 5th-grade student who was mixed half-White and half-Hispanic. Believe it or not, she did say that she felt anxious, but only because of the timing. She did not really understand the point of the test, but she did however seem to get the questions that were to draw, circle, and mark an X all accurately according to the instruction. She did mention that some of the questions did require quick thinking, such as #24. Print a word that looks the same whether it is printed forwards or backward. She said, “I chose eye, it was simple and something that I just quickly thought of”. But, if you are anxious and rushing to get through, your mind may draw a blank, which you can see has happened to other participants. This participant was only 10 and I felt she

really had a good perspective on this test, being that she did discuss with me that she is used to taking so many tests and that she has taken the placement test, mid-level testing, and the questions sometimes seemed to be as “silly as this test”. Lastly, I took the test. I wanted to see how someone who was young, and currently still in school was still experiencing taking tests and doing research and how my results would compare with others who have taken the test. To be honest, I felt the test was a bit overwhelming as well. I thought there would be at least some questions regarding the state or even the country, so I could at least feel some type of way that this test could have been useful. Then I could say, ok, maybe that is why some people failed, because they did not know, or could not recite the constitution. But instead, it was just a test that was really set up and designed to trick you.

After researching all about these tests and then taking the one from Louisiana, I saw each state had different criteria. Mississippi was required to interpret the constitution and write an essay on the responsibility of citizenship. Georgia had specific questions regarding the state while Alabama seem to focus on questions “Name the attorney general of the United States” (Vintage news daily). This article in the Vintage News Daily also clearly stated that even for people with a college education that some of the prompts regarding the questions would be confusing, Which I myself have found them to be. The Louisiana test had not one question regarding any of the above that I have mentioned. “However, it was Louisiana, by far, that had the most impossible test”, this was written in the article and I felt after taking just this one, that I could see that to be true. These questions were truly designed to confuse any person who took it, especially those with lower education. Another article I read said, “The tests were intentionally confusing and difficult and one wrong answer meant a failing grade” (Katie Serena). So as you can see, we still should care as literacy is currently still an issue that not only impacts African

Americans but low-income families, people with low education levels, and even immigrants.

Although thankfully there are no more of these literacy tests, there are still so many things that can be improved to make literacy a number one priority for all and to not discriminate. After all, if we don't have literacy, how can we continue to function and thrive in today's society.

Works Cited/References

<https://vintagenewsdaily.com/could-you-pass-this-literacy-test-designed-to-prevent-blacks-from-voting/>

<https://allthatsinteresting.com/voting-literacy-test> Katie Serena

<https://americanhistory.si.edu/>