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ACR150 Individual Research Paper draft

Option 5: Analyses of Literacy Tests

Literacy tests are a way to test someone's ability to read and write. They are not as simple as determining levels of literacy, but determine people's access to their rights. They were often used to oppress immigrants and more specifically deny African-Americans voting rights. They were outlawed in 1965 as a requirement for voting. Although these tests are no longer used, a form of it is given to immigrants in order to gain citizenship and they are still incredibly challenging tests that many American-born people would not be able to pass.

In order to further understand the effectiveness and the purpose of the literacy tests that were given out for voting eligibility, I have given 5 participants a test to try themselves. The literacy test that I chose to focus on and give to my participants was the State of Louisiana literacy test from 1964. This was created in order to determine eligibility for voting and would be graded by a white registrar and needed 100% accuracy in order to pass.

I asked them to describe what they were thinking and feeling throughout the whole test from start to finish and then reflect back on their experiences. I asked them if it seemed to be testing their literacy and if they felt it was biased. Some of them took it upon themselves to research the meaning of literacy, but I did not require them to fully understand the concept of literacy before responding.

Some feedback from before even starting the test was the feeling of nerves knowing that even one question wrong means failure and that it is very harsh before beginning. This has created a fear and stress that only some people have to experience just to be considered to play any part of the country's political situation. This fear may discourage people from even trying which is unfair and cut the numbers of anyone experiencing discrimination.

The participants said they were confused already by the first question and that they had to reread it many times to know what it was asking. The fifth question got a reaction of disgust based on the “first, first.” These are creating frustration and not opportunity to show literacy skills and knowledge. Question six got a reaction based on the fact that it didn’t apply to voting at all.

There were also issues with questions like 15 where spelling backwards is not applicable to everyday life and even less important for voting. This is similar to the writing upside down in question 21. It does not mean anything about someone’s ability to read and understand and write. Someone said “the wording is so twisted, I can’t imagine how anyone would do this if English was not your primary language.” This is showing the discrimination against not only immigrants but people who also just speak a different language or way of learning.

Question 20 did not bring forward a new concept. Someone said it was “rude”. Question 30 seems to not even be grammatical and that bothered participants as well. A participant said it felt like an app called “the Stupid Test” that tries to trick you and gives different riddles to solve.

Someone said “I felt like every question was asking me if I could pat my head while rubbing my stomach. It was a logic/riddle exam, none of which was relevant.” This same participant pointed out that they are getting a masters in policy and they definitely failed. They said that it seemed to be a way to control political power.

Participants said that it was “testing more than literacy, the ability to read and write.” It is testing “higher levels of functioning and reasoning.” This same person felt as though it was trying to trick them instead of gauge their abilities for reading and writing. They said that “political preference doesn’t require the challenges presented.”

My group of participants have all graduated college and two have gone through graduate school, yet they all said they failed. This means that this isn’t based on knowledge we get through schooling and it isn’t really based on knowledge at all. This test was based on who the reviewers believe should vote based on their assumptions about literacy and desire for control over political power, discriminating against African American people.

The fact that no one passed shows that it wasn't about whether or not you got the questions right, but who you are and if you were even given this test in the first place. If it were just about the questions, there would have probably been no one allowed to vote.

Literacy tests have always been a way to further discriminate against African Americans and take away their political power. Literacy tests are no longer used in this same way but there are still ways that African Americans are pushed away from receiving human rights and more specifically, voting. This expands to other marginalized communities. Historically and presently, the United States tries to find ways to keep political power in the hands of white men and we can see how ridiculous these tests are at this point. These participants proved the tests to be ineffective at identifying literacy and very effective in promoting prejudice and bias.

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

<https://www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/question/2012/pdfs-docs/literacytest.pdf>

<https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/voting-rights-act>