



Listening & Learning Roundtable Discussions Report (2023-2025)

“There is no human circumstance more tragic than the persisting existence of a harmful condition for which a remedy is readily available.”

–MLK, Jr. (shared by a roundtable participant in Fort Worth)

Since its inception in 2016, The Reading League (TRL) has emerged as a preeminent leader in advancing the science of reading (SoR). It is a position that the organization does not take lightly. Recognizing its limited perspective due to the historical whiteness of the SoR space, one of TRL’s goals is to promote diversity and inclusion in its work. Moreover, the League acknowledges the importance of elevating and honoring the perspectives and experiences of individuals from historically underrepresented and/or marginalized communities.

To this end, TRL contracted with current Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB) consultant Dr. Altheria Caldera to engage in a multi-year Listening and Learning Tour. Dr. Caldera facilitated five roundtable discussions in urban areas across the United States. The largest school systems in these metropolitan areas serve majority-minority students (Native American, Black/African American, Latino/Hispanic, Asian American/Pacific Islander).

City	Date	School System	% students of color¹
Syracuse, NY:	10/03/2023	Syracuse City	>70%
San Diego, CA:	04/26/2024	San Diego Unified	>70%
Charlotte, NC:	10/17/2024	Charlotte-Mecklenburg	>70%
Fort Worth, TX:	10/25/2024	FWISD	>85%
Atlanta, GA:	02/20/2025	Atlanta City Schools	>80%

Additionally, a virtual roundtable discussion with members of the Educators of Color Conference² Community was held on 03/31/2024.

¹ Links to student demographic data can be found in Appendix A.

² The Educators of Color Conference Community is a 9-month fellowship designed to provide learning and leadership opportunities for educators of color who, through their attendance and presentations, add to the diversity of attendees at TRL’s Annual Conference.

About the Participants³. Our goal was to listen to and learn from roundtable participants who represented many roles in education—district—and school-level administrators, instructional coaches, nonprofit leaders, teacher educators, graduate students, tutors, advocates, and more. They all live, work, and/or serve in communities of color.

Participants were nominated by 1) TRL staff, 2) TRL board members, 3) TRL chapter leaders, 4) ECCC members, 5) TRL collaborators, and 6) Dr. Caldera. Groups ranged in size from 5-13 and were mainly composed of people of color. The few white participants who work in schools and communities with students and families of color gave deference to their peers of color. Dr. Maria Murray, chief listener and learner, was present for each session. Kari Kurto captured participants' ideas in summarized written notes.

About the roundtable discussions. Discussions were semi-structured and guided by four questions. However, participants were allowed the liberty to speak freely and frankly about literacy in their schools and communities. Consequently, not all questions were addressed each session, and some questions invoked more in-depth responses than others.

The following questions guided the discussions:

- We understand that there are many equity issues in education. We brought you together today because you're doing important work to address some of these issues. What are your concerns about literacy, specifically, in communities of color that have been historically marginalized (Black, Hispanic/Latino, Native American)?
- How might improved literacy outcomes impact other areas of concern for communities of color?
- The SOR is sometimes described as a "white space"? Why do you think this is such a "white space"?
- I mentioned what we hope to come from this in the opening. Do you have any additional ideas about what you think our next steps should be? What should our next investments be?

Notes from each roundtable were analyzed by three members of TRL staff and Dr. Caldera. The report that follows is a synthesis of responses from the six roundtable discussions, arranged by theme⁴.

³ See Appendix B for a complete list of participants and roles.

⁴ In this report, a theme is defined as a recurring idea or concept.

10 Themes From Roundtable Discussions

1. **The Intentional Withholding of Literacy, Historically & Contemporarily.** The need to read came about because of European colonization, which brought about a dependence on the written word. Because of this dependence, it is essential that all people are able to read and write in order to participate as citizens in the Western world. (Worship of the written word is a characteristic of white supremacist culture.)

However, literacy is a civil/human right that has been legally denied to people of color, namely Black/African American citizens, because it enables individuals to access knowledge that puts them on the path to freedom. The system continues this way by design.

Passionate participants see themselves as “today’s freedom fighters” and echoed a commitment to literacy and justice for all. However, they questioned whether society “really wants this type of world” because it would transform the social order. They see lack of access to reading not just as a social justice issue but also as a public health crisis.

2. **How Reading Proficiency Would Impact Students of Color & Their Families.** Participants enumerated many powerful and moving benefits to literacy and expressed their awareness of its value through phrases such as, *“This country could be saved if we improved literacy,” “The grass will be greener for all of us,”* and *“It would be as if the sky opened.”* They shared how the individual student, family, school, and community would be impacted.

- A. Individual student: Confidence, competence, self-worth, self-efficacy, learn to be a better human, empathy, improved mental health, and joy.
- B. Family: Employment/career opportunities and healthcare
- C. School: Fewer discipline problems, climate characterized by a sense of belonging, better social interactions, decrease in school violence/bullying, more educators of color, and cultural relativism.
- D. Community Impacts: Civic engagement, reduction in poverty and crime, better quality of life, and citizenship.

3. **Comprehensive Approach to Literacy/Critical Literacy.** Reading ability must not just be about test scores but about empowering students to read, write, speak, and think about their world. We must stress the importance of recognizing the link between reading, writing, speaking, and thinking. Having these skills can prevent underrepresented communities from being told what to think, say, write, etc. Students can engage in more inquiry-based learning and critical thinking.

- 4. The Role of Family (Parents/Caregivers).** Participants stressed the importance of strong connections between home, school, and community. They see literacy as largely a family responsibility, and therefore, families must be involved in conversations about the SoR. However, lack of family involvement shouldn't be an excuse for students' inability to read. Educators must pay attention to how parent involvement looks for low-income families because it looks different than in affluent communities. It is also important to understand how the generational miseducation/negative schooling experiences of families of color contribute to today's reading outcomes.

Families should . . .

- A. be empowered to educate their children because they are the first teachers
 - B. prioritize reading and care about literacy
 - C. be equipped to advocate for change
 - D. be made aware of the literacy crisis, and should know how their children are doing in reading
 - E. have access to accurate (unmanipulated) data
 - F. encourage children to dream big instead of falling into roles that are right in front of them
 - G. have a role in defining what access looks like
 - H. be provided materials that can be used in the home
- 5. Teaching Preparation & Professional Development.** Many teachers simply don't know how to teach reading. Teaching reading is rocket science. Teachers of students of color need the most intensive professional development. Inconsistent reading instruction in teacher preparation. English language learner (ELL) courses should be required in teacher certification programs as a significant part of rethinking what teacher prep curricula should look like.

Teachers also need better (sustained) PD, including an understanding of dyslexia, especially when working with students of color. Teachers need to learn to be critical consumers of research in order to evaluate this evidence and apply it instead of simply being told what to do. Scripted curricula = hyper-regulation of Black teachers.

- 6. Cultural Responsiveness/Socio-Political Awareness.** Schools and institutions of higher education need more teachers of color and teacher educators of color. These fields are currently occupied mainly by white women who need to better understand cultural relevance. We must have teachers who understand our children. Most teachers are white females, creating a disconnect between students' cultures and teachers' cultures.

More exploration of the intersection of the SoR and culturally responsive teaching needs to be done. If educators don't understand the barriers that students/families face, they

won't be able to reach them with science. They must also recognize that many students/families of color face trauma and that reading can help students cope with trauma (escape from reality). Researchers should acknowledge that the application of SoR can and should be different. We need experts who can say, "This is what it looks like for our community."

There must be an awareness of the systemic issues that students experience that prevent success, no matter what the latest PD is. The socio-cultural elements need to be included in SoR conversations. Educators should know how to draw upon students' cultural backgrounds. Relationships matter. Be aware of teacher biases. Administrators should truly be instructional leaders who know the links between culture and learning.

Standout Questions:

- A. What does SoR look like in different communities?
- B. What does it mean to see reading as a cultural activity?
- C. Can educators see the genius in Black and Brown children?
- D. What are the intentional acts that create inequities in reading?

7. **Science/Evidence.** The term "science" might be problematic because many families don't use this language to discuss reading. Additionally, Black educators and families might reject the term because of the ways Black people have been victimized by science," which leads to distrust of "others" who might be experimenting on their children. Recognize that science is ever-changing and messy. Educators must know how to operationalize the science. SoR can be overwhelming because there's so much to know. There needs to be clear distinctions between what is and is not evidence.

Moreover, educational research is "very white." Old white men have had access to create theories, and the voices of new and emerging scholars haven't effectively and respectfully integrated into the SoR. This is by design. Scholars of color are not encouraged to be in this space. Gatekeeping. Recognize that the research isn't finite; science is ongoing.

Last, seek out scholars who are studying the SoR with students of color. Learn from the elders who taught our children to read. Acknowledge that white people aren't the only ones with the knowledge.

Participants indicated the importance of asking questions about the evidence:

- A. Evidence-based for whom?
- B. What evidence is being considered?
- C. Who is creating the evidence base?

8. **Bilingualism and Multilingualism.** Educators must see multilingualism as an asset. Bi and multilingualism should be encouraged for all students. Transitional English programs for speakers of Black English and other language variations can make reading instruction equitable. (Stop pathologizing Black English.) Don't push ELLs into special education because of language differences.
 9. **Resources/Materials.** Schools need appropriate resources that align with the SoR and are culturally responsive. Schools can't outsource teaching reading to a computer. Reading curriculum is a money grab. Materials should be culturally responsive, including kids with disabilities.
 10. **Early Literacy.** Participants pointed out that students of color need better access to high-quality instruction and early and often intervention. This can happen through universal, high-quality Pre-K. Foundational skills that allow students to unlock the code are essential. Reading must be meaningful for early readers, not just about acquiring skills.
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Findings: What We Learned

1. Communities of color are concerned about . . .

- A. The perceived deliberate withholding of access to reading in marginalized communities
- B. Teacher preparation and development
- C. Connections between SoR and culturally responsive teaching
- D. Longstanding systemic inequities
- E. The role of families in addressing literacy
- F. Early literacy
- G. How SoR impacts bilingual and multilingual students
- H. Instructional materials

2. Communities of color recognize many ways their communities might be impacted by individuals being proficient readers:

- A. Improved socio-emotional skills
- B. Enhanced overall well-being
- C. Increased economic options
- D. Informed civic engagement

3. Communities of color believe the SoR is a "white space" because of . . .

- A. Historical devaluing of the work of educators/scholars of color. Acknowledge that Black educators have used structured literacy for many years.
- B. Intentional exclusion. Recognize that the exclusion of other voices might be intentional. It's hard to get white women (leaders in education and nonprofits) to relinquish their power.
- C. Doubts about the evidence base. Make sure that the evidence informing instruction is diverse and inclusive.

4. Communities of color think that TRL's next steps and investments should be . . .

- A. Using language that communities of color can connect with/relate to in positive ways.
- B. Amplifying the research and teaching of Black and Brown scholars and educators.
- C. Pulling folks in. "We have a place for you here."
- D. Featuring a conference strand/summit with a deliberate focus on students of color.
- E. Putting money behind this work (address concerns).
- F. Having the moral courage to follow this work through.
- G. Loving students of color. This work must be motivated by love. One cannot lead/teach without love. We need educators and leaders who truly care for our children.

Recommended TRL Next Steps

We value the knowledge- and perspective-sharing of roundtable participants and want to be intentional about using the knowledge we gained to shape our work at TRL. Our next steps include the following:

1. Decide if additional roundtable discussions would be beneficial.
2. Discuss the implications of the findings for each part of the organization. Consider possible changes in behavior/actions, knowledge, and access.
3. Create an action plan to include work already in process and upcoming actions.
4. Make findings available to chapter leaders.
5. Host a meeting with roundtable participants to share findings and an action plan.
6. Follow up with roundtable participants to see if there's been any movement around the SoR since the roundtable (online survey).
7. Present findings and an action plan at the annual national conference of TRL.

Acknowledgements

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APPENDIX A

School District Enrollment

Syracuse City School District:

<https://data.nysed.gov/enrollment.php?year=2024&instid=800000040902>

San Diego Unified School District:

https://www.sandiegounified.org/about/about_s_d_u_s_d/about_us

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools:

[https://go.boarddocs.com/nc/cmsnc/Board.nsf/files/D83PPR65787E/\\$file/Back%20to%20School%208.13.24.pdf](https://go.boarddocs.com/nc/cmsnc/Board.nsf/files/D83PPR65787E/$file/Back%20to%20School%208.13.24.pdf)

Fort Worth Independent School District:

<https://www.fwisd.org/about/about-fort-worth-isd>

Atlanta Public Schools

https://app3.doe.k12.ga.us/ows-bin/owa/fte_pack_ethnicsex.entry_form

APPENDIX B

Roundtable Participants

Syracuse Participants (9)

Name	Company/Organization	Role
Chad W. Underwood	Partners in Learning, Inc.	Executive Director
Bishop Dr. H. Bernard Alex	Ministries of Victory Temple/Ministries Outside the Walls and Syracuse Chapter, National Action Network	Senior Pastor/President
Reba Hodge	SCSD	Director, Diversity, Equity, and Belonging
Derrick Carr	Onondaga Community College	Project Partner Director
Millie McDade Woods	Former SCSD Teacher/Literacy Advocate	Retired Educator
Anthony Davis	Syracuse City School District	Superintendent
Joe Horan	Building Men Program Inc.	Executive Director
Tamica Barnett	Syracuse City School District	SCSD Board President
Samuel Rowser	On Point for College, Inc.	Executive Director

San Diego Participants (5)

Name	Company/Organization	Role
Allison Ohle	Diamond Educational Excellence Partnership (DEEP)	Executive Director
Jose L. Cruz	San Diego Council on Literacy	Chief Executive Officer
Marisol Quevedo Rerucha	Heartset Consulting Group	CEO

Shawn Powell	Albert Einstein Academy Charter Elementary School	Literacy Specialist
Michanne Hctor	Project CLEAR Leadership and Learning	ELA Coordinator

Fort Worth Participants (9)

Name	Company/Organization	Role
JaNiece Elzy	Texas Woman's University	Assistant Professor
Melissa Rincon	FWISD	Principal, Meacham MS
Endia J. Lindo	Texas Christian University	Associate Professor
Dionna Latimer-Hearn	REACT Initiative, Inc.	Education Director
Wanda McKinney	Literacy Advocate for African-American Students	Advocate
Frederick Masteron	N/A	Retired Teacher
Twyla Masteron	Leadership ISD	Director of Programs/Alumni and Community Engagement
Elisabeth Ivy	ESC Region11	Regional MTSS Lead
Jetti Ridley	FWISD	Instructional Coach (Reading)

Charlotte Participants (9)

Name	Company/Organization	Role
Paola Pilonieta	University of North Carolina at Charlotte	professor
Shonette Lewis	NCDPI	Literacy Facilitator
Allison Gunter	Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools	Curriculum Specialist-MTSS
Steve Hall	Augustine Literacy	Executive Director

	Project	
Lashon Larie Lee	Office of Early Learning	Literacy Facilitator
Kamille Bostick	Center for Racial Equity in Education (CREED) and the University of North Carolina at Charlotte	Director of Programming (CREED); Doctoral Candidate in Curriculum & Instruction - Literacy (English Education strand)
Dawny Hill	Fostering Communication - Private practice	Speech language pathologist/reading consultant
Sony Anderson	Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools	MTSS Specialist
Adrienne Law Powell	UNC Charlotte	Ph.D. Student

Atlanta Participants (13)

Name	Company/Organization	Role
Nayeede Bailey	Kindezi West	K-3 Literacy Coach
Ray James	The Boyce L. Ansley School	Head of School
Ryan Lee-James	Atlanta Speech School	Chief Academic Officer
Tonya Winters	National Parents Union	Ga. State Director
Ebony Michelle Brown	Clayton County Public Schools	Coordinator of Elementary English Language
Ashlee Haynes	Mitchell County School System	Director of PreK-5 Curriculum & Instruction
Shakia Bruce	Metro RESA	Growing Readers Certification Specialist
Jason B. Allen	National Parents Union	National Director of Partnerships
Jason Mizell	Berkmar High School	Parent Instructional Support Coordinator
Korrye Gaskins	Rollins Center for Language and Literacy	K3 Science of Reading Field Implementation

		Coordinator
Dorothea Pope	Hope Springs Christian School (Also, Read & Feed Program nonprofit)	Bookkeeper@HSCS & Founder/E.D.@S.A.Y. In Need-Read & Feed Prgm
Dr. Angela Jean-Louis	Founder: Leadership Concepts Institute/Educational Advocate/Creator of Leaning into Dyslexia	CEO
Sherri Lucas-Hall	Designed2Teach	Reading Tutor