

GENERATIONAL ILLITERACY: PART I

UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM: THE TRUTH BEHIND THE SECRET

By Tanaya Gable

If you would have approached me with the topic of generational illiteracy back when I was in high school, I probably would have had a harder time understanding it. For as long as I can remember, literacy has been a focal point in my life. I recognized my desire to be a writer as early as 5th grade, and understood quickly, the importance of academics, vocabulary and literacy, as a whole. It wasn't until I went away to college and began to take interest in new things that I really started to understand the harsh reality of illiteracy. If you are reading this blog there's a good chance that you're no stranger to literacy. You probably read every day, both for work and enjoyment. You, more than likely, retain new information from a host of sources, regularly, and understand the importance of words and how they enrich our world.

That probably makes it harder to imagine the large numbers of children and adults who are only semi-literate, drowning in a world they can't process the way you and I can. The first summer after I received my B.S. in Journalism and English Liberal Arts, I spent several months teaching a Journalism course at a nonprofit in Philadelphia. My class was a small group of about 15 high school students, ranging from freshmen to seniors. In order to assess their skill levels and writing potential, I assigned a short essay asking each student what they hoped to gain from the Journalism program. That night, as I was going over the students' work, I could hardly believe it. About half of the students, if not more, were writing on elementary school levels. In time, I found that many of the students had little to no understanding of some of the very novice rules of language arts, reading and writing. This was only the beginning. Soon after, I was faced with meeting the parents of many of the students, (those who I could persuade to meet with me) and I found that many of them were dealing with same literacy struggles.

In 2002, before the Subcommittee on Education Reform Committee on Education and the Workforce, United States House of Representatives, actor James Earl Jones testified:

"92 million Americans have low or very low literacy skills - they cannot read above the 6th grade level. To be illiterate in America - or anywhere for that matter - is to be unsafe, uncomfortable and unprotected. For the illiterate, despair and defeat serve as daily fare. Can any of us who do know how to read really understand the sadness that is associated with the inability to read? Can we truly relate to the silent humiliation, the quiet desperation that can't be expressed, the hundreds of ways that those who cannot read struggle in shame to keep their secret? The struggle out of illiteracy ... is still a part of the story of America."

Today, our nation faces an epidemic that is destructive to our overall progression and our future. Functional illiteracy has become a disease. According to the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), it has overtaken one-third of America's children as early as the fourth grade. This percentage includes two-thirds of African-American students and almost half of all children living in the inner cities. Beyond the basic definitions, there is significance in the shocking statistics about the functionally illiterate.

Think about all of our day-to-day tasks that require a level of literacy. Things like reading the directions on a medicine bottle, reading a bill, finding and keeping a job, or reading to a child. Things that are very routine to you or I can be a struggle for someone with weak literacy skills.

For a long time, many educators, politicians and even parents viewed illiteracy as social and educational issue - someone else's problem. However, more recently we have come to understand the economic consequences of the lack of literacy skills for America, Americans and American business.

Illiteracy has a significant impact on the economy as well. 15 million adults holding jobs today are functionally illiterate. The American Council of Life Insurance reports that three quarters of the Fortune 500 companies provide some level of remedial training for their workers. Yes, Fortune 500 companies! And, a study done by the Northeast Midwest Institute and The Center for Regional Policy found that business losses attributed to basic skill deficiencies run into the hundreds of millions of dollars because of low productivity, errors and accidents.

In the late 1980s, one-half of all adults in federal and state correctional institutions could not read or write at all. About one-third of those in prison today have completed high school. Evidence indicates that the problem begins at home. Illiteracy is an inter-generational problem, arising from a parent-child pattern. Poor academic achievement and high school dropout rates are far too common among children of illiterate parents.

The adult non-reader may have left school early, had a physical or emotional disability, had incompetent teachers or simply may have been unready to learn at the time reading instruction began. Because they are unable to help their children learn, parents who can't read often perpetuate the inter-generational cycle of illiteracy. Without books, newspapers or magazines in the home and a parent who reads to serve as a role model, many children grow up with severe literacy deficiencies. There is no single cause of illiteracy.

Consider some of the major issues in our communities and our nation; family dysfunction, drugs, AIDS, homelessness, poverty – all of which could be better if more people could read, write and understand. Now is the time to start devising a plan that can help illiteracy become a part of our past, not our present.

Stay posted for **GENERATIONAL ILLITERACY: PART II - ATTACKING POVERTY THROUGH LITERACY.**

SOURCES:

[NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATIONAL STATISTICS](#)
[EDUCATION AND THE WORKFORCE COMMITTEE](#)