

**Learning to Read by Talking about Race:
Integrating Race Talk into Elementary Literacy Instruction¹**

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Introduction

Reading and discussing literature about race, racism, and antiracism is a promising practice for building children's print-based *and* racial literacies in the elementary classroom (Husband, 2019). Research has demonstrated that children develop a range of literacy skills during shared reading experiences, including phonological awareness, fluency, and new vocabulary, which can enhance comprehension (International Literacy Association, 2018). At the same time, children as young as six months old are aware of racial differences and by age two, begin to form pro-White biases and engage in racially discriminatory practices (Williams & Steele, 2019). Interactive read-alouds can increase children's critical understandings about race while simultaneously developing foundational literacy skills of interpreting, analyzing, and responding to texts. Yet in most elementary classrooms, critical discussions about race are avoided (Brown et al., 2017). Children are often viewed as too young to critically engage with issues of inequity. This absence of critical race talk leaves students without racial literacy—the skills to understand, confront, and ultimately change the current unjust status quo (Sealey-Ruiz, 2021).

Theoretical Framework

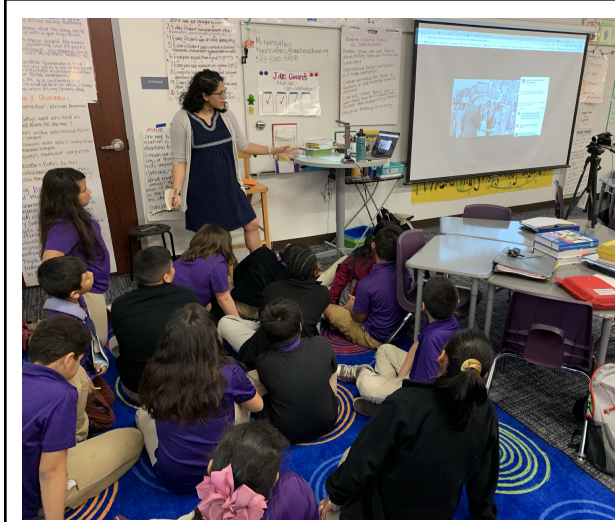
- Racial literacy is a discursive and analytic practice of interpreting how race is connected to the inequitable distribution of resources across social institutions (Guinier, 2004).
- When applied to the literacy classroom, racial literacy involves using literacy—reading, writing, and discussion—to understand race, confront racism, and enact antiracism (Sealey-Ruiz, 2021).
- Literacy from a social practice perspective views reading and writing beyond cognitive skills to purposeful, meaning-making practices drawn upon in community (Gee, 2015).

Methodology

- This study explores how two elementary teachers, one of whom identifies as multiracial and the other as white, used conversations about race to teach reading.
- This qualitative, multiple case study took place in two elementary schools, one that served a working class, Latinx community, and one that served an affluent neighborhood of South Asian and white families.

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Ms. Perez, College Prep Elementary



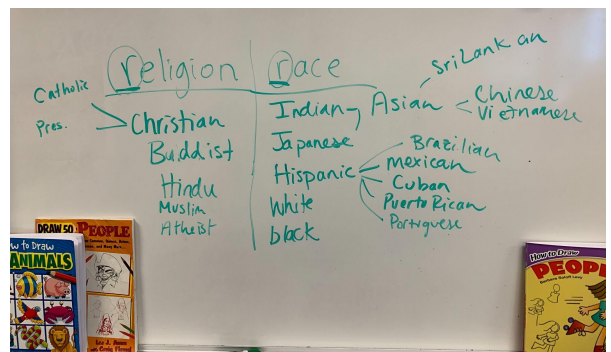
Ms. Allen, Honeybee Elementary

- Data were collected using participant-observation methods and 35 classroom conversations about race were selected for further analysis.
- Data were analyzed using inductive and discourse analytic methods

Findings

- Inductive analysis illuminated that both teachers introduced new vocabulary, modeled comprehension strategies, and engaged their students in critical analysis of texts through classroom race talk.
- **Vocabulary:** In the context of classroom race talk, new vocabulary terms emerged as the teachers introduced ideas and history related to race and racism. As the teachers introduced new ideas about race, they also supported students in developing a shared language to discuss these ideas.

I think I know why this [confusion] is happening. Religion is more based on the beliefs you have on higher powers. Race, as we have over here on our anchor chart, is on the way you look, it's a categorization. They both start with [the letter] 'R' and they have to do with who you are and your identity
(Ms. Allen Classroom Observation 10/25/19).

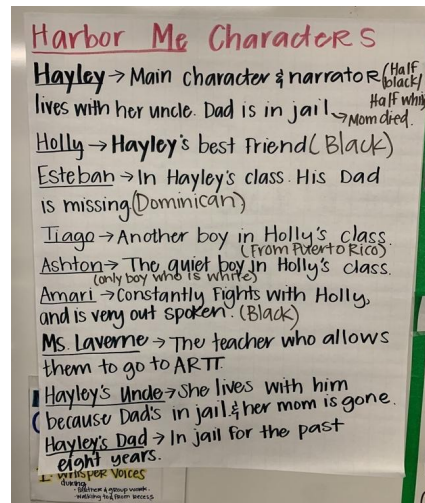


- **Comprehension:** Readers perform different kinds of thinking to comprehend or make meaning of a text (Aukerman, 2013). One of those processes involves deciphering the main message or what Fountas and Pinnell describe as thinking “within the text [to] gain the basic or literal meaning” (p. 33), a practice that skilled readers often do automatically.

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By attending to race and racism, both teachers offered students additional tools to make meaning of the literal print text.

Ms. Perez's first read aloud of the school year, *Harbor Me* (Woodson, 2019), included numerous characters from different racial, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds. Ms. Perez noticed that students were having trouble understanding the plot because they were unsure who the characters were (09/05/19). To support students' comprehension, Ms. Perez created a character anchor chart that included the characters' racial and ethnic identities. This tool offered students information about the character to support them in their meaning-making of the events.



- **Analysis and Critique:** The teachers' literacy instruction also included teaching students how to analyze and critique texts. Reading and analyzing texts critically can present challenges for students as they develop skills to question the authority or neutrality of texts. In this study, teachers modeled and encouraged students to think beyond the text to analyze power during shared reading experiences.

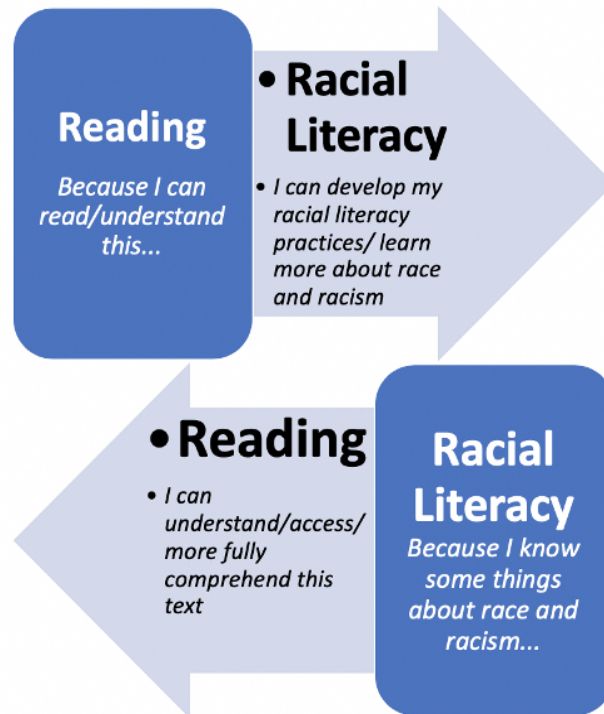
It started in 2017 when Colin Kaepernick was kneeling during the national anthem during football games. And typically when you are an athlete you stand for the national anthem ... he chose to take a knee and he was the first to do that as far as with the NFL games. He chose to do that because he was trying to highlight or make people aware Black Lives Matter and he was trying to make people aware of police violence against black people... So the title of this article is "Nike sends bold message with new ad featuring Kaepernick... Who do you think has the power in this situation [and] why? There's a lot of talk in the article about different people's point of view and you get to decide who you think has the most power" (Ms. Allen Classroom Observation, 10/11/19).



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Discussion and Significance

This study and its findings add to nascent understandings about how *racial* literacy can support the development of young students' print-based literacies, offering insight into the ways elementary educators can use literacy instruction to combat injustices and create positive change. In this study, the teachers' instructional approach created opportunities for students to use reading and writing for real-world purposes by analyzing racial oppression and proposing more just futures. One barrier to talking about issues of race in the elementary classroom is a concern that discussions will detract from the goals of supporting young students' literacy development (Kaczmarczyk et al., 2019). By using race to teach students how to read and make connections across texts, the teachers in this study demonstrated the possibilities for fostering comprehension strategies and racial literacy simultaneously. This finding is significant because it suggests a multidirectional relationship exists between literacy and racial literacy development. To date, research has largely focused on the ways reading instruction can foster racial literacy in the classroom (Rogers & Mosley, 2006). This research adds to an emerging body of research in the field of college composition studies that the practices of racial literacy can equip students with tools to develop their reading and writing practices (Grayson, 2019). In sum, this analysis suggests that talking about race and supporting students' development as powerful readers served similar aims, suggesting new ways to conceptualize elementary literacy instruction as one that confronts racism.



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