



# SPECIAL

Racial Literacy

# ISSUES



EDITED BY DETRA PRICE-DENNIS

VOLUME 1      IMPLICATIONS FOR CURRICULUM, PEDAGOGY & POLICY

Editor: Detra Price-Dennis  
Series editor: James Sitar  
Cover and interior design: Ash Goodwin  
Cover images: Marvin Young  
Typesetter: Jim Gallagher

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VOLUME 1 **RACIAL LITERACY**

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**ISSUES**

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# EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

DETRA PRICE-DENNIS

## **My Racial Literacy Journey**

As a young Black girl growing up in West Virginia, I remember spending a lot of time thinking about race. My earliest memory involves showing off my knowledge of the color wheel to my family, as we gathered in the living room after dinner. I handed my father a brown piece of construction paper, my mother a yellow piece of construction paper, my grandmother a black piece of construction paper, and my grandfather a white piece of construction paper. In my mind, the colored papers represented how I saw their racialized identity. While I don't remember what anyone said, I recall many stories I have been told about this moment and how their smiles, silence, and looks to each other spoke volumes.

Prior to this moment, I was intrigued by the varying skin tones in my family and spent a lot of time trying to make sense of those variations. Though I do not remember using the word race, it was something that I was not afraid to question, discuss with others, and draw attention to in my community. I noticed all of the spaces and places where I was the only Black child—and where my family were the only Black people—as well as the spaces and places where everyone was Black. My observations did not make me feel sad, angry, or afraid, and they never got in my way of making friends and having enjoyable experiences. However, I do remember wondering why people were grouped together in those ways. My observations and questions evolved as I got older, and I would ask my dad excessively why we never saw Black people on hikes, at the beach, or at this magical toy store that was nestled on top of a mountain. I also wondered why there were no white people at our church, whether you had to be white

to work at the bank or jewelry store, and why white people did not live in my grandparents' neighborhood. Out of all of those questions, I remember one response: my father told me that when he was little, the city opened up a tract of land for Black people to purchase and build homes. Before this time, Black families could not own property. I also learned that the Black families who lived on his parents' street were business owners, coaches, teachers, and nurses: they were the first Black people to live in a planned community within the city. The original families stayed in the neighborhood in the homes they built, which is why my grandparents did not have white neighbors. Although I do not recall how I reacted to this information, I do remember thinking that race and power were connected.

As I reflect on those memories now, I recognize the tentative—and then more confident—steps I was taking on my path to racial literacy development. My early experiences talking about race opened up conversations with my family about historical literacies, power, financial disparities, labor, colorism, diversity, stereotypes, racism, and social class, to name a few topics. During this formative time, no one told me to avoid these discussions because I was too young or that talking about race made people uncomfortable. Consequently, these conversations informed the narrative I was developing about living in a racialized society and what that meant for me and my family. The preceding vignette illustrates my personal history related to activating my racial consciousness. According to Sealey-Ruiz, this is a first and necessary step in the archaeology-of-self process that educators committed to racial equity move through to better understand how our racial literacy pedagogy

is connected to our life experiences (Price-Dennis & Sealey-Ruiz, 2021; Sealey-Ruiz, 2020).

### **What Is Racial Literacy?**

Racial literacy is a construct that foregrounds the relationship between race and power. Price-Dennis and Sealey-Ruiz define racial literacy as “a skill practiced when individuals are able to probe the existence of racism and examine the effects of race as it intersects with institutionalized systems” (2021, p. 14). Racial literacy can be used to analyze how being raced (e.g., through racial profiling, discrimination, or violence) in our society has material consequences for people of color that impact employment, housing, health care, finances, and education. The origin of the concept of racial literacy can be traced back to the work of sociologist France Winddance Twine (2004; 2010) and her research on racial socialization. Scholars in the field of literacy education have drawn on racial literacy to better understand the ways educators and students navigate and make sense of race and racism and the ways they affect student participation, pedagogical choices, curriculum development, policies, and experiences that shape identity construction.

Sealey-Ruiz (2020) and Guinier (2004) engage racial literacy as a heuristic that exposes structural racism to better understand how racial identity shapes experiences in our society, specifically in schools. Accordingly, Sealey-Ruiz & Greene argue that racial literacy is a “skill and practice in which individuals are able to discuss the social construction of race, probe the existence of racism and examine the harmful effects of racial stereotypes” (2015, p. 60). K-12 literacy educators have been effective advocates for curriculum, school policy, and pedagogy that support this approach to racial literacy in their classrooms. This collection shows how teaching from a racial literacy perspective is in conversation with antiracist, culturally responsive, equity-oriented frameworks that uplift curriculum design and instructional strategies to help educators (re)imagine the classroom as a space that supports the development of racial literacy skills and practices with their students.

### **Why Focus on Racial Literacy in K-12 Literacy Education?**

There's a great deal of uncertainty, discord, and increased volatility across a number of critical

institutions in our society. Each day on social media and tv news outlets we read, listen to, and/or watch events unfold that are linked to political, economic, health, legal, and educational inequities that can be traced to racist ideologies and practices political, economic, health, legal, and educational inequities that can be traced to racist ideologies and practices. Public schools across the country are being subjected to pending state legislation and new laws that seek to limit how race—among other markers of identity—can be taught in K-12 classrooms. Policy groups and grassroots organizers have circulated talking points and manifestos about critical race theory; culturally responsive education; equity education; social-emotional learning; diversity, equity, and inclusion programs; and LGBTQ+ rights. The common denominator across these topics, which have garnered a lot of public interest, is the need for educators to design curriculum and engage in instructional strategies that not only meet the educational needs of their students but also generate the capacity for them to build critical thinking about power, equity, and justice as civic-minded citizens in our country. This book takes up this charge as it relates to adopting an antiracist stance, reflecting on experiences with race and racism, becoming reflexive about how those experiences shape teaching and learning, and drawing on this information to disrupt and dismantle systems of racial inequality in education.

In the field of literacy education, Price-Dennis and Sealey-Ruiz envision racial literacy as “the ability of students to identify, in professionally published and student-generated texts, concepts related to race and racism, and exercise their skills in discussing the complexity of these topics” (2021, p. 14). If educators consider intentional approaches to this idea, fostering racial literacy among K-12 students will offer significant opportunities for teachers and learners to explore new strategies as a means to identify, disrupt, and work toward dismantling racist ideologies that circulate in their communities and cause harm in our society. In this capacity, racial literacy functions as a blueprint to support teachers and learners as they acquire the skills and practices to question assumptions about race and racism, engage in conversations with their peers to trace how power and social inequities tied to race impact liberation and justice, and become more reflexive as a means to sustain an antiracist ideology that informs how they interact in the world.

## Curating the Edited Volume

The authors featured in this collection illustrate approaches that foster racial literacy through research, pedagogy, and curriculum development. These previously published articles were selected from NCTE publications using a three-phase process. In phase one, NCTE journal articles written about one or more of the following areas were identified as possible chapters for this book:

- Racial literacy
- Critical race theory
- Antiracist pedagogies
- Social or racial justice and equality

Roughly 250 articles were identified through this process. In phase two, I read the articles and created a matrix that aligned with the following six components of racial literacy development outlined in Sealey-Ruiz's 2021 policy brief on racial literacy: critical love, critical humility, critical reflection, historical literacy, archaeology of self, and interruption.

This process identified 35 articles as possible chapters for the book. In phase three, I revisited and sorted each article based on grade level, the component/s of racial literacy development, and the type of journal in which the article was published. The goal in this final phase of the process was to identify 18 articles that would appear as chapters in this book. In addition to the components of racial literacy development, I kept track of the range of grade levels, the number of practitioner-based articles, research articles, and columns across the publications to ensure representation among those factors.

The authors of these recent articles provide a comprehensive examination of race in K-12 literacy education. The collection opens with a focus on policy, shifts to examine classroom practices, and then explores community-based learning spaces that support the components of racial literacy development. The remaining chapters highlight (1) specific ways teacher education can focus on race and racism in service of advancing racial equity, (2) how educators can engage in self-reflexive action, and (3) the roles that solidarity and dialogue have in pushing forward an agenda for education that is grounded in humanizing pedagogies centered on racial equity, healing, and antiracism.

## Overview of this Volume's Contents

Sealey-Ruiz's policy brief introduces us to racial literacy as a catalytic theory that can create opportunities for more equitable and inclusive literacy pedagogies. She outlines the components of racial literacy development and makes recommendations for educators and administrators to move theory into practice. In the next article, Johnson demonstrates how race functions as a mediator in literacy pedagogy. He puts forth a theory of Critical Race English Education (CREE) to make visible how educators can leverage humanizing pedagogies to work against white supremacy and anti-Blackness in the classroom. Then Germán makes the case for discussing racism in classrooms. She encourages readers to build on the questions and concerns students bring into the classroom about race and racism in order to develop intentional lesson plans that create an informed and agentic approach to dismantling racial oppression connected to white supremacy. Webb examines colorism in English language arts instruction. Polleck and Spence-Davis share insights into how incorporating themes connected to racial justice, equity, and social change support students' perception of advocacy in their daily lives. Grinage unpacks key moments in a lesson about racial progress in America that exposes the trauma Black students may experience when asked to defend or justify their position on topics connected to their humanity. Beschorner, Burnett, and Ferrero share details and lessons learned from a program they created to foster students' racial consciousness in support of antiracist actions. Kelly provides conceptual tools to support white teachers and students in discussing race and racism as part of their work to dismantle racism in our society. Dunn and Love make the case for Black joy as an anchor for antiracist English language arts pedagogy. Johnson and Sullivan make the case for drawing on Black intellectual thought with high school students to honor the rich cultural literacy practices those students bring to the classroom. Pennell offers insights into how a group of middle school educators created a course for their students that examines issues of race and social justice. Ohito and the Fugitive Literacies Collective introduce us to the concept of fugitive literacy practices as emancipatory tools from whiteness and anti-Blackness. Greene amplifies the lives and literacies of Black girls through their work on podcasting. Player introduces a feminist of color writing pedagogy she employed

with girls of color in an after-school writing club. Turner and Griffin, as well as Player, offer additional insights and questions that urge us to draw connections among race, gender, and power as a means to unveil how “institutional and environmental forces” (Guinier, 2004, p. 115) impact the experiences Black girls and girls of color navigate in our society. Wetzel addresses the ways research and policy can inform the intentional approaches that teacher preparation programs use to address race, racism, and racial literacy. Neville's essay centers racial literacy as a heuristic to guide how teacher educators mediate discussions connected to power, race, oppression, and resistance. And the volume concludes with Martinez, Baker-Bell, Eagle Shield, and Lee's dialogue about working across diverse communities committed to racial equity, liberation, and justice. Each chapter in the volume adds to the complexity of racial literacy by layering various identity markers such as class, gender, language, and culture.

Racial literacy provides an entry point for analyzing the impact that race has on our daily lives in a manner that foregrounds the realities of living in a racialized society. K-12 schooling is uniquely positioned as a dynamic site for examining the construction of race, which manifests in our literacy curriculum, pedagogy, and policies that impact classroom instruction. With these realities in mind,

this collection addresses elements of racial literacy including fluid definitions, skills, practices, instructional strategies, lesson plan design, and insights gained from merging theory with practice. The chapters in this book reflect the urgent need for educators, literacy researchers, students, and school communities to move “toward constructive conversations about race and antiracist action” (Sealey-Ruiz, 2021) as part of a broader effort to create and sustain humanizing spaces for teaching and learning. ■

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