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Racial Literacy

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☐ **What Is Racial Literacy?**

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What Is Racial Literacy?

In schools, healthy conversations involving race across class, culture, and other characteristics of diversity are possible. The use of multiple texts and modalities to engage students in these conversations is readily facilitated by digital technologies. To develop racial literacy among students, educators can draw from historical, fictional, and poetic texts most effectively. Teachers who are able to engage their students in the topic of race are most successful when they employ self-exploration and honest assessments about the role they may play in perpetuating racist ideas. Once specific behaviors are recognized, it becomes easier for racially literate individuals to interrupt those behaviors in the future. Racially literate teachers develop curricula that are centered on fostering open-mindedness, commitment to inquiry and reflection, and exploration of ideas connected to the concepts of democracy and equity in schooling. Racially literate teachers make evident their deep commitment to social justice in the ways they interact with students, families, and their BIPOC colleagues.

Racial literacy is a skill and practice by which individuals can probe the existence of racism and examine the effects of race and institutionalized systems on their experiences and representation in US society (Rogers & Mosley, 2006; Sealey-Ruiz, 2011; Sealey-Ruiz, forthcoming; Skerrett, 2011). Students who have this skill can discuss the implications of race and American racism in constructive ways. A desired outcome of racial literacy in an outwardly racist society like America is for members of the dominant racial category to adopt an antiracist stance and for persons of color to resist a victim stance.

Thus, racial literacy in English classrooms is the ability to read, discuss, and write about situations that involve race or racism.

Thus, racial literacy in English classrooms is the ability to read, discuss, and write about situations that involve race or racism. Scholarship that informs the concept of racial literacy identifies race as a signifier that is discursively constructed through language (Hall, 1997); fluid, unstable, and socially constructed (Omi & Winant, 1986) rather than static; and not rooted in biology, but having "real" effects in individual lives (Frankenberg, 1996). The architect of the concept of racial literacy, Harvard Professor Lani Guinier (2004), implored a shift from racial liberalism to racial literacy. She critiqued racial liberalism as an inactive, deficit approach to racial equality that subjugates Black people to the position of victim and does not activate the required antiracist stance that white people must take against their own racist ideals and actions.

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Racial Literacy in Teacher Education

Several scholars have written about the discomfort many white preservice teachers experience when teaching students of color (Cochran-Smith, 2004; McIntyre, 1997; Tatum, 1997), particularly male students of color in urban schools. Often this discomfort is expressed in the form of "color blindness" as preservice teachers deny the salience of race by adopting a color-blind approach and view the experiences of students of color as if they were white ethnic immigrants who would eventually assimilate into mainstream society (Johnson, 2002). The end result of this "Pedagogy of Discomfort" (Boler & Zembylas, 2002) is a diminishing of the social makeup of present and future students of color with whom these future teachers will interact. Scholars of racial literacy (Sealey-Ruiz, 2012, 2013; Sealey-Ruiz & Greene, 2011; Skerrett, 2011; Rogers & Mosley, 2006) offer approaches to developing racial literacy in ways that move an individual or group of individuals toward constructive conversations about race and antiracist action in schools.

Racially literate teachers can distinguish between real and perceived barriers in their classrooms that may be linked to institutionalized systems that govern schools and society.

Embedded in the concept of racial literacy is the significance of opening and sustaining dialogue about race and the racist acts we witness in schools, home communities, and society writ large. Racial literacy urges educators to take a close look at an institutionalized system like school and examine it for the ways in which its structure affects students of color. Educators who develop racial literacy are able to discuss with their students and with each other the implications of race and the negative effects of racism in ways that can potentially transform their teaching. Racially literate teachers can distinguish between real and perceived barriers in their classrooms that may be linked to institutionalized systems that govern schools and society. These teachers also develop an ability to resist labeling students as "at-risk" based on race and social status; rather, they are more likely to view racialized students as "at-promise" individuals who need and deserve increased educational opportunities (Milner, 2020). Two specific outcomes of racial literacy in a historically racist society like America are for members of the dominant racial category to adopt an antiracist stance and for persons of color to resist a victim stance (Gilroy, 1990). In practice, racial literacy allows preservice teachers to examine, discuss, challenge, and take antiracist action in situations that involve acts of racism.

Developing the racial literacy of all teachers, but specifically preservice

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teachers who will teach Black and Brown youth, is significant. Preservice teacher education programs are critical sites for foregrounding the discussion of race and problematizing the ways in which the social and academic behaviors of Black and Brown students are misread. At its best, the preservice experience allows preservice educators to practice an integrative and holistic pedagogy, incorporating the most effective methodological and instructional practices into their teaching. Effective teacher education programs allow for rich clinical experiences where preservice students are able to hone their craft to address complex issues under the tutelage of seasoned professionals. However, once in service, the occasional professional development experiences are often "one-shot" skills-based exercises that are disconnected from the integrative complexities of culture and society. Teacher education candidates who instead receive an education that adequately prepares them for the classroom challenges they will encounter and builds their self-confidence and self-efficacy will stay in the profession longer (Darling-Hammond, Chung, & Frelow, 2002). Preservice programs, as Latham and Vogt (2007) have argued, better equip students to persist in teaching. Teacher education programs that diminish the gap between theory and practice provide extensive experience in schools that immerse preservice teachers in the school climate and thus prepare new teachers for the challenges they

face. With these unique features and possibilities for learning, preservice teacher education programs have the potential to develop the racial literacy skills of their candidates and prevent teachers from relying on biased, stereotypical visual images of Black and Brown youth. Instead, these programs make it common practice to critique and interrupt the images of their students of color that they see in the media.

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Enacting Racial Literacy

A teacher education program that fosters racial literacy must provide spaces for teachers to talk about their fears and uncertainties in embracing this type of pedagogy. Schools of education can embrace the following tenets as they move their students toward deep self-reflection, an equity mindset, and development of racial literacy. Specifically, teacher education programs must encourage both preservice and inservice educators to do the following:

- Engage the reading of critical texts (e.g., writings about race, racism, diversity) across the curriculum as a method of acquiring language to discuss, problematize, and refute racial stereotypes and racist

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hierarchical systems in society and in their schools (i.e., the school-to-prison pipeline).

- Understand that before becoming culturally competent and culturally responsive teachers, they must engage in self-examination around notions of race, Black children, and other children of color.
- Recognize the need for and accept the task of holding students accountable for practicing racial literacy in their teacher education classrooms and in classrooms where they will observe and teach.
- Discuss and critique personal experiences with race and racism. This is an essential component of developing racial literacy.

Racial literacy in teacher education promotes deep self-examination and requires actions that can lead to sustainable social justice and educational equity for all students, and Black students in particular.

- Take action against racist or discriminatory practices that cause negative outcomes for their Black students and other students of color in the schools where they will ultimately teach.

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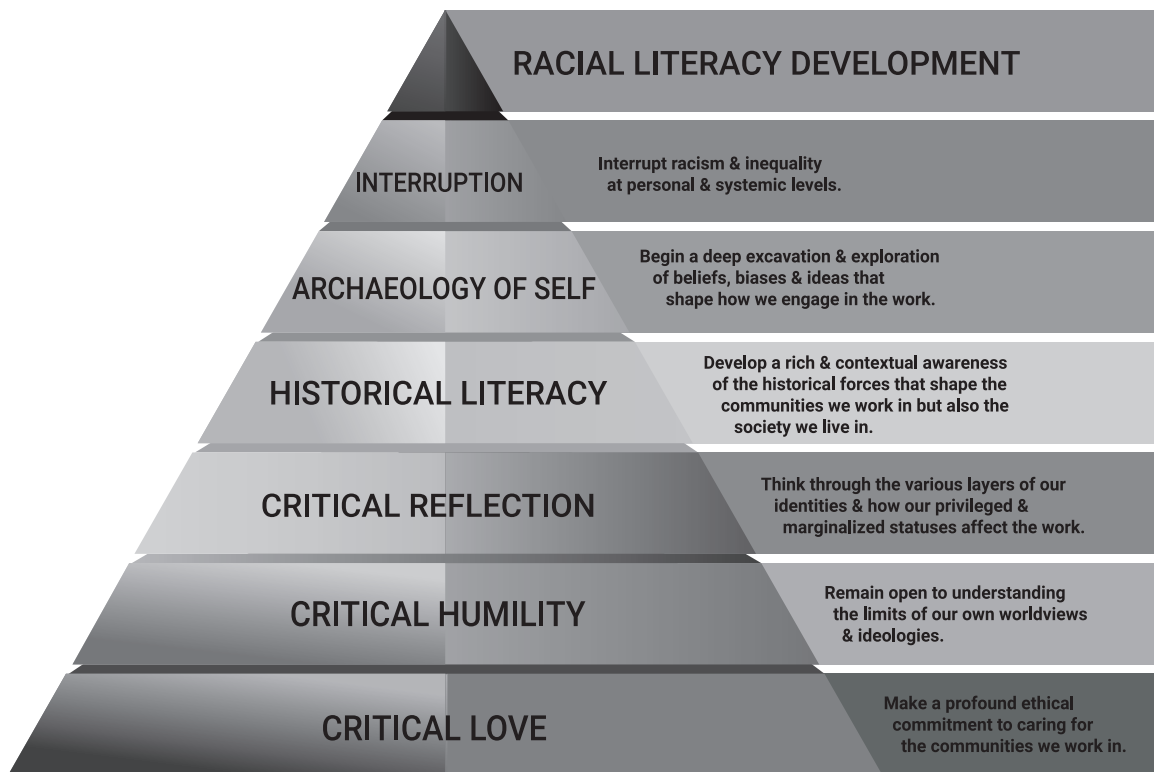
Black students in particular. Without racial literacy, teacher educators and their students will continue to find themselves powerless in systems based on race.

Racial Literacy Development Model for Teaching and Learning

Research has revealed that conversations about race, when conducted effectively, provide education professionals with the confidence they need to alter their pedagogy in more culturally responsive and culturally sustaining ways. They become skillful at engaging their students in essential conversations that relate to their learning and social development. The six components of racial literacy development prepare and support educators in their journey to becoming racially literate and eventually taking action to interrupt racism when they see it happen in their schools and classrooms.

Sealey-Ruiz (2020) has conceptualized Six Components to Racial Literacy Development: critical love, critical humility, critical reflection, historical literacy, archaeology of self, and interruption.

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RACIAL LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

INTERRUPTION
Interrupt racism & inequality
at personal & systemic levels.

ARCHAEOLOGY OF SELF
Begin a deep excavation & exploration
of beliefs, biases & ideas that
shape how we engage in the work.

HISTORICAL LITERACY
Develop a rich & contextual awareness
of the historical forces that shape the
communities we work in but also the
society we live in.

CRITICAL REFLECTION
Think through the various layers of our
identities & how our privileged &
marginalized statuses affect the work.

CRITICAL HUMILITY
Remain open to understanding
the limits of our own worldviews
& ideologies.

CRITICAL LOVE
Make a profound ethical
commitment to caring for
the communities we work in.

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