

Fostering Racial Literacy with Children's Literature

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The social construction of race in the United States is deeply rooted in our lives and reflected in our K-12 programs, policies, curriculum, and instructional practices. As more challenges are levied at books that reflect the lives and experiences of racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse students, we propose racial literacy as a framework to guide critical conversations in response.

What is Racial Literacy?

Racial literacy is a skill and practice in which individuals inquire about the construction of race and its intersection with social systems and institutions.¹ Children exhibit racial literacy with the ability 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.”² The goal, then, is for individuals to adopt an anti-racist stance and work toward social equity.

Sealey-Ruiz³ identifies six components of racial literacy: critical love, critical humility, critical reflection, historical literacy, archaeology of self, and interruption.

These components work in tandem with the following three tenets of racial literacy: question assumptions, engage in critical conversations, and practice reflexivity.

These concepts are united around a deep commitment to decolonizing K-12 literacy instruction to create a foundation for equitable and humanizing learning. Thus, if librarians and educators develop instructional strategies with literature that reflect these ideas, then racial literacy among K-12 children will increase and position everyone to identify, disrupt, and work towards dismantling racist ideologies that circulate in their communities and cause harm in our society.

Why Focus on Racial Literacy with Children's Literature?

Libraries across the country are facing unprecedented political and censorship challenges that seek to curb the availability of books and programs on race (among other markers of identity).⁴ Public schools are also being subjected to pending legislation that seek to limit how race 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 is the need for librarians and educators to design programs and 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.

Despite partisan rhetoric circulating to ban discussions about race, there is no denying that race and racism are indelible aspects of all children's lives. Developing racial literacy enables children to inquire into the existence and effects of race, other social constructs, and the institutionalized systems that harness those constructs to affect their lived experiences and representations in US society.⁵ Children's literature facilitates racial literacy development in multiple ways, fostering children's abilities to read not just the words on a page, but also the world in which those pages were created and now exist. In doing so, they learn how to question assumptions, perceive the sociocultural contexts around them, and advocate for social equity and change.

To illustrate these points, we share two titles, one picture book and one novel, that exemplify how children's literature can be powerful tools for developing racial literacy with young readers.

The picture book *Beauty Woke* (Versify, 2022), written by NoNieqa Ramos and illustrated by Paola Escobar, can be used with all ages to guide inquiries into racial literacy. Blending the genres of poetry and fairy tale, as well as incorporating both Spanish and English, *Beauty Woke* retells the Sleeping Beauty tale for a modern, culturally diverse, and socially conscious world. In this book, we see Beauty, a Puerto Rican girl of Taino and African descent, shutting down and disengaging with the world not because of a needle prick from a spindle, but from her observations of the racist, discriminatory, and systemically inequitable treatment of Black and brown people around her.

Beauty Woke provides clear examples of the critical love and reflection and the historical literacy needed to develop racial literacy, as Beauty's family and community reawaken her pride in her Boricua heritage through their love and support. In doing so, they facilitate the archaeology of self and interruption processes Beauty undergoes to affirm and celebrate her identity, "Lit with resistance, / imagination, / hope. / Rooted in truth."

To foster readers' racial literacy development, we can ask the following questions while sharing this book:

1. How does *Beauty Woke* serve as a window and mirror of your own intersectional identities?

References

1. Detra Price-Dennis and Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz, *Advancing Racial Literacies in Teacher Education: Activism for Equity in Digital Spaces* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2021).
2. Price-Dennis and Sealey-Ruiz, *Advancing Racial Literacies*.
3. Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz, *Racial Literacy: A Policy Research Brief*. (Champaign, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 2021).

2. What is the role of community in Beauty's awakening?
3. What does the term "woke" mean, and how is it used in various texts and contexts to discuss issues of racial justice and equity?

Another title that can help facilitate racial literacy development is Varian Johnson's novel *The Parker Inheritance* (Arthur A. Levine Books, 2019), which won a Coretta Scott King Author Honor. Pre-teen protagonists Candice and Brandon search for a treasure in their Southern town using clues left by Candice's grandmother. With a penchant for puzzles, Candice and Brandon use their literary knowledge and research skills to solve the clues, uncovering the town's secrets and one family's longstanding fight for social justice.

To foster readers' racial literacy development, we can ask the following questions while sharing this book:

1. How do our perceptions of other people impact the ways they are treated in society?
2. In what ways do the characters address issues of systemic racism in their town?
3. How could the characters in this book trace the historical legacy of racism and injustice throughout the history of their community? What would you want to see them do with this information?

Children's Literature as Resources for Racial Literacy Development

These are just two examples of the richness that children's literature provides for fostering racial literacy development with young readers. Other books that may be helpful for this goal should allow us to help children explore the ways characters are dealing with racial literacy and what it means to be in community with other people. In doing so, we can use children's literature to present opportunities to talk about race and racism and ask the necessary questions needed to interrupt and dismantle inequitable practices and policies in society. &

4. Richard Luscombe, "US Libraries Face 'Unprecedented' Efforts to Ban Books on Race and Gender Themes," *The Guardian*, September 16, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/sep/16/us-libraries-book-ban-challenges-race-gender>.
5. Price-Dennis and Sealey-Ruiz, *Advancing Racial Literacies*, 14.