

Books like me: an investigation of urban elementary teachers' journey toward more culturally relevant pedagogy

Books like me

1

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Abstract

Purpose – The single-site case study described herein is part of a two-year professional development (PD) initiative aimed at helping teachers from an urban elementary (K-8) school learn how to implement explicit, transactional comprehension strategy instruction across grades using culturally relevant books. This paper aims to describe the urban elementary teachers' successes and challenges in their first-year implementation of providing culturally relevant literacy instruction.

Design/methodology/approach – Three types of qualitative data were collected: researchers' anecdotal notes during the professional learning sessions; teacher focus groups; and teachers' blog reflection entries.

Findings – The findings revealed that the PD for culturally relevant literacy instruction resulted in teachers' heightened awareness of how identities and social subjectivities are negotiated in and through culturally relevant discourse, the implicit and explicit bias in the school curriculum. Finally, PD served as a catalyst for facilitating students' and teachers' racial and cultural identity development.

Research limitations/implications – The findings of this study suggest that culturally relevant books which incorporate the students' background may aid in student engagement because students are able to draw upon their culturally acquired background knowledge to better comprehend texts. Thus, to engage, motivate, affirm and promote students' literacy success, teachers need to possess knowledge of their students' race and culture, as well as their background, language and life experiences.

Practical implications – The findings of this study suggest that culturally relevant books which incorporate the students' background may aid in student engagement because students are able to draw upon their culturally acquired background knowledge to better comprehend texts. Thus, to engage, motivate, affirm and promote students' literacy success, teachers need to possess knowledge of their students' race and culture, as well as their background, language and life experiences.

Social implications – Teachers and teacher educators must reflect on, question and critique their own work in preparing teachers to enter today's schools as critical, reflective educators. The types of children's literature that are selected and introduced to students play an important role in dismantling technocratic approaches to literacy instruction and strengthen one's understanding of one another. Teachers must select books that challenge assumptions and speak of possibilities for change.

Originality/value – Culturally relevant pedagogy that includes culturally relevant children's literature holds promise for improving literacy instructional and assessment practices and school experiences for culturally and linguistically diverse students, especially in environments where high-stakes testing is emphasized. It is one way to imagine a better schooling experience for students that affirms identities and honors and sustains diversity. For culturally relevant pedagogy to be a reality in education, stakeholders must be on board, including students, parents, teachers, administrators and policymakers.

Keywords Multicultural, Language, Race, Pedagogy, Critical

Paper type Research paper



Introduction

In recent years, there has been growing interest among literacy educators in supporting the literacy development of diverse learners, which has stemmed from the politics of high-stakes assessment and the awareness that culturally and linguistically diverse students are not provided with the literacy skills and resources society demands (Zoch, 2017). Specific underperforming groups include low-income students, males and ethnic/racial minorities such as African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Native Americans and English learners (Cartledge *et al.*, 2015). From 1992 through 2017, the average reading score for White fourth-graders was higher than those of their Black and Hispanic peers. The risk conditions disproportionately exist in urban settings.

According to the Nation's Report Card [National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2017], the average reading score for fourth-grade students in high-poverty schools (205) was lower than the average scores for fourth-grade students in mid-high poverty schools (218), mid-low poverty schools (228) and low-poverty schools (240). Despite some gains in the past decade, these gaps remain large and resistant, demanding much greater teaching effort for the poorest performing students. At the same time, the negative effects created from an overemphasis on high-stakes testing can especially be seen in the participating school featured in this study, which is low performing and predominantly serves students of color. The percentage of students achieving proficiency in reading/language arts is 25% (which is lower than the state average of 63%) for the 2016–2017 school year.

In her 2005 Presidential Address to the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Ladson Billings (2006) challenged the idea of a simple “achievement gap.” Ladson Billings (2006) argued that these achievement test scores are reflective of the historic, economic, sociopolitical and moral decisions and policies characteristic of American society which negatively affect people of color and contribute to the “education debt” (p. 5). Currently, dominant forms of mainstream curriculum center on the hegemonic knowledge, experiences, values and voices of dominant communities (Au *et al.*, 2016; Sleeter, 2017).

In 2016, the National Center for Educational Statistics found that approximately 80% of public school teachers throughout the USA are White, despite racial shifts in the overall population of children and youth in schools (Department of Education, 2016; Sleeter, 2017). To complicate matters, many teachers have little contact with people outside of their own racial identity (Van Guten, 2002). Concomitantly, White teachers have had little exposure to multicultural education. Although efforts at multicultural education in teacher preparation are expanding, and diversity, ethnic and Black studies classes are offered at numerous colleges and universities, it is unclear if these courses serve as general education requirements for teacher education (Cheruvu *et al.*, 2015; Thornhill, 2016). White student registration in those classes have historically been low (Espenshade and Radford, 2009). Thus, most teachers today continue to enter the classroom unprepared to effectively teach African American and other students of color (Blanchett, 2006).

Although teacher education programs and in-service teacher training workshops across the country have begun the work of better preparing the nation's educators to effectively meet the needs of a diverse student body (Bissonnette, 2016), more work can be done. Integrating culturally relevant (CR) pedagogy (CRP) into instruction is more important now than ever (Christ and Sharma, 2018) and provided the impetus for this study. As this study will elaborate, one way to disrupt the emergence of the “education debt” is to provide literacy instruction using CR books (henceforth called “mirror books”; Bishop, 2007) that are responsive to marginalized students' diverse backgrounds and personal experiences, honor their diversity as an asset and increase their comprehension skills (Hermann-Wilmarth and

Ryan, 2019; McNair and Bishop, 2018). The two-year, single-site research project described herein was part of a professional development (PD) initiative aimed at helping teachers from an urban elementary (K-8) school learn how to integrate mirror books in their literacy instruction. This paper seeks to describe the teachers' successes and challenges with using mirror books in their literacy instructional and assessment practices. The questions guiding this study were as follows:

- How does the integration of mirror books impact teachers' literacy instructional practices?
- How does the integration of mirror books impact students' literacy learning?

Theoretical framework

Culturally relevant pedagogy

CRP (Ladson-Billings, 1995) was first coined as a result of a series of research studies examining the best practices of "master teachers" within urban, elementary and secondary public schools in the USA (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 1999). CRP is rooted in the belief that learning is a socially mediated process explicitly connecting to students' racial, cultural and linguistic experiences (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Gay (2015) further contends that CRP involves teachers connecting classroom experiences and learning to children's home experiences and native language.

It is important to remember that CRP also involves a teacher's deep understanding of how teaching is a sociopolitical act and how the classroom can serve as a place for racial equity, justice and opportunity (Banks, 1993a). However, little research explains if or what PD opportunities are available to help teachers learn how to have conversations related to such historical and contemporary racial issues as police violence, segregation and institutional racism (Love *et al.*, 2016). Furthermore, it has been found that teachers often worry that having these race conversations too early could be harmful (DiAngelo, 2012; Husband, 2010). Early childhood educators who wish to make space for learning about race and racism in their classrooms may feel unprepared to approach these complex issues (Vittrup, 2016). However, research demonstrates that students' awareness of racial differences and the impact of racism begin quite early (Tatum, 2003; Winkler, 2009). Multiple studies document the ways that young students take notice of racial differences and note that as early as preschool, students may begin excluding their peers of different races from play and other activities (e.g. Tatum, 2003; Winkler, 2009). Thus, many argue that teachers need to create safe spaces for young students to explore these critical and complex issues, especially in light of the current political and cultural climate where these issues are highly visible (Pitts, 2016; Harvey, 2017). As society is not equitable and racial bias does exist, the colorblind approach denies children the validity of their experiences of the world. Because the impact of racial bias is visible, not allowing children to process this injustice is confusing, and it denies them the opportunity to see themselves as agents of change to resist injustice. Colorblindness fails to acknowledge the impact of racism on all people and, further, does not push White people to do the important work of unpacking the legacy of White supremacy in our lives (DiAngelo, 2012).

When students are able to transform their lived experiences into knowledge and to use the already acquired knowledge as a process to unveil new knowledge, they will be able to participate rigorously in dialogue as a process of learning and knowing (Love *et al.*, 2016). It may be surprising that students can discuss race, do it quite well and are ready for teachers to facilitate these learning opportunities (Cole and Verwayne, 2018; Vasquez, 2001, 2004,

2010, 2014b). For example, in Canada and the USA, Vasquez (2001, 2004) worked with children from ages three to five, questioning issues of social justice and equity using children's literature and the everyday as texts (i.e. food packaging, media ads, popular culture). Reading the world as a text that could be deconstructed and reconstructed created opportunities for Vasquez (2001, 2004, 2010, 2014b) and her students to deconstruct, disrupt, reconstruct and sometimes dismantle problematic practices within and outside of the school. This coincides with one of Ladson-Billings' (1995) tenets of CRP which includes decentering Whiteness by integrating mirror books that are not aligned with White middle-class norms, provide a mirror into students' lives and include opportunities for students to have conversations that address social inequities (Paris and Alim, 2017; Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence, 2018).

Mirror books. While populations of Children of Color continue to grow rapidly in the USA, children's literature representing diverse cultures remains disproportionately negligible (Zoch, 2017; Zygmunt, Clark, Tancock, Mucherah and Clausen, 2015). One approach for improving the literacy performance of students from diverse backgrounds has been the utilization of "mirror books" which are texts in which readers see a reflection of their identity and experiences (Bishop, 2007). Culturally and linguistically diverse students who have sufficient background knowledge relative to mirror books they encounter in school increases their reading engagement, confidence and their ability to recall information more directly and make meaningful personal connections to the content, resulting in increased levels of comprehension (McNair, 2014; Rosenblatt, 1978; Zoch, 2017; Zygmunt *et al.*, 2015).

Unfortunately, students from dominant cultural groups have always had ample opportunity to see their images – or *mirrors* of themselves – in literature (Gangi, 2008). Historically, children of color have failed to find a reflection of their identity in school materials. There is ample research to suggest that children do not acquire literacy exclusive of their culture and social histories (Goldenberg, 1987; Reese and Gallimore, 2000; Reese *et al.*, 1995). It is crucial for children of color to see themselves, their culture and their perspectives in the books they read (Zoch, 2017). A review of the literature on the implementation of CRP, including the integration of authentic mirror books, indicates a connection to positive identity development and resiliency among culturally and linguistically diverse learners, above and beyond documented gains in literacy achievement (Hanley and Noblit, 2009; Zoch, 2017). A positive self-concept is paramount for children's social and emotional development (Axelrod and Gillanders, 2016). Children start the process of developing their self-concept in early childhood (Brown, Mangelsdorf, Neff, Schoppe-Sullivan, and Frosch, 2009). As mentioned above, young children notice and mentally categorize differences; develop attitudes about themselves and others; and assume societal stereotypes about their own person and others who may look and act in similar ways (Bellini *et al.*, 2016; Derman-Sparks and Olsen-Edwards, 2010). Children obtain information about their identity through portrayals of "people like them" in books and media (McNair and Bishop, 2018). Stereotypical and negative images of the self can misrepresent how children define themselves (Axelrod and Gillanders, 2016). One can use the power of stories to provide guidance to support children's social emotional development (Axelrod and Gillanders, 2016). Authentic literature that provides a realistic depiction of Black children, for example, can contribute to a more positive development of their identity and self-concept (Axelrod and Gillanders, 2016).

The Cooperative Children's Book Center (2013) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison documents that of the approximately 5,000 children's books published in 2012, 68 (1.3%) were written by African/African American authors (down from 79 in 2011, and 102 in 2010),

and only 119 (2.4%) were about Africans/African Americans (down from 123 in 2011, and 156 in 2010). While the quality of African/African American children's literature is documented, the underrepresentation of this genre remains undisputed. When these books are included, many are about historical and contemporary racism, including images of Black children and teens under duress. [Thomas and Reese \(2015\)](#) acknowledge the importance of these stories, but emphasize that books with African American detectives, doctors, crime fighters, Queens, scientists, etc. are concomitantly needed to highlight ideas about humanity, the diversity within and ones' inherent worth (p. 71).

There is still an omission of books written by authors of color and about people of color in high-profile venues and on the national lists that preservice and in-service teachers use to build their classroom libraries (Norton, 2013; [Zoch, 2017](#)). This documented dearth is exceedingly troubling within the context of research on children's literacy acquisition and provided the impetus for this study. The participating school's principal articulated the need for engaging his staff in PD aimed at increasing elementary teachers' knowledge and integration of "mirror books" in their literacy instructional practices.

Methodology

Research design

A single-site case study (Creswell, 2012) methodology was used to guide the design, data collection and analysis of this qualitative study to understand the elementary teachers' perceived successes and challenges with using CR books in their literacy instructional and assessment practices. Case studies are undertaken when educational researchers want to derive in-depth understandings of a particular phenomenon that is unique or unusual (Creswell, 2012). In this sense, this single-case design was collective in that it tapped data from different sources, and it was descriptive in that it sought to describe the natural phenomena (Creswell, 2012).

The researchers/authors are literacy education faculty members from a nearby private university who wanted to develop, expand and sustain a collaborative and reciprocally beneficial partnership with the local elementary school. X (name blinded for review) is a White female who has been an Assistant Professor for five years. Her research interests focus on supporting pre-service and in-service teachers' 21st century literacy instructional practices. Y (name blinded for review) was born and raised in Canada where she attended predominantly White, middle-to-upper class schools, and has not received any formal PD or training on culturally responsive pedagogy. Z (name blinded for review) is a White female who has been an Associate Professor for 10 years. Her research is centered on character education, children's literature and reading comprehension. Although she has not engaged in formal PD or training to introduce or develop culturally responsive pedagogy, she has engaged in self-study to expand her pedagogy and impact as a teacher educator.

Setting and participants

Williamsburg Charter School (pseudonym) is a public charter school in a high-poverty district in the northeastern USA. In the 2018–2019 school year, this K-8 school served 419 students who were 94% African American, 4% Hispanic and 2% White, with 99% receiving free or reduced-price lunch. According to the 2018 state standardized scores in reading, writing, math and science, the school district within which the participating school was located was ranked 561 out of 603 school districts in the state.

The 14 K-8 urban female teachers taught a variety of subjects, including English language arts, mathematics, science and social studies in self-contained classrooms. [Table 1](#) contains demographic information about the participating elementary teachers

Table 1
Teacher participant
demographic
information

Grade	Teacher	Race/ethnicity
Kindergarten	Loretta	White
Kindergarten	Meredith	White
Grade 1	Mary	White
Grade 1	Daria	Black
Grade 2	Amy	White
Grade 2	Katie	White
Grade 3	Kristen	White
Grade 3	Britney	Black
Grade 4	Melissa	White
Grade 4	Jessica	White
Grade 5/6	Carol	White
Grade 5/6	Iris	Black
Grade 7/8	Jody	White
Grade 7/8	Kristina	White

(pseudonyms used). There was a lack of racial diversity among the teachers at Williamsburg Charter School; the majority ($n = 11$) of teachers identified as White, and three teachers identified as Black.

Data generation

During the 2018–2019 academic year, the researchers worked alongside the participating school's reading specialist and literacy coach to co-facilitate whole-staff, 90-min PD workshops on a monthly basis during the school's regularly scheduled onsite PD. During these workshops, 20 teachers (grades K-8) learned fiction and non-fiction comprehension strategies (i.e. story elements, character traits), and corresponding graphic organizers using CR texts across grades and content areas. Thereafter, each teacher participant engaged in monthly co-planning sessions with the co-facilitators during their regularly scheduled planning time (approximately 45 min). Then, approximately one week after each co-planning session with the individual teachers, the co-facilitators observed the teachers' respective classrooms. Following each lesson, teacher participants were asked to contribute to a communal blog and critically reflect on the challenges and successes they encountered during their lessons. At the end of the project, the researchers facilitated 1-h focus groups with same-grade teachers to address the research question.

The researchers devised a list of age-appropriate informational and literary picture and chapter books that were purposively selected to reflect the background and lives of the target population (McNair, 2014); these books were used during the teachers' read-aloud instructional period to model question generation strategies (story elements and character traits). The five-member team responsible for generating and validating these CR books consisted of the two researchers of this study who were literacy education professors, the participating school's reading specialist, literacy coach and principal. The team reviewed popular children's books that were about urban/African American children. The team used content from the professional literature (Bishop, 2007; Sharma and Christ, 2017) to construct guidelines for developing the CR passages for Black children. A total of 10 passages were created: five fiction (two for Grade K-3; two for Grades 4–8) and five non-fiction (two for Grade K-3; three for Grades 4–8) picture and chapter books (see Table 2). Then, the research team members reviewed/revised each passage to ensure cultural authenticity, developmental and grade appropriateness. These 10 books focused on positive self-image

Genre	Grade	Book title	Author	Book summary
Fiction book	K-3	I Love My Hair!	Anastasi (2001)	This story imparts the message about appreciating what you look like, and encourages Black children to be proud of their heritage and features
Non-fiction picture book	K-3	Fancy Party Gowns: The Story of Fashion Designer Ann Cole Lowe	Blumenthal (2017)	This is the story of Ann Cole Lowe, an African American designer and dressmaker. This book recounts Ann's personal and racial struggles as she pursues her passion for designing and dressmaking, including her experience creating and delivering Jacqueline Bouvier's wedding dress
Fiction chapter book	4-8	Chevrolet Saturdays	Boyd (2005)	This book tackles several important issues, including adjusting to a new teacher and the introduction of a stepparent, encompassed within the bigger theme of the challenges faced by African Americans living in what is still a largely prejudiced society
Non-fiction picture book	K-3	Nina: Jazz Legend and Civil Rights Activist Nina Simone	Briere-Haquet (2017)	This is the story of Nina Simone, jazz-music legend and civil-rights activist, shared as a lullaby to her daughter. This book recounts her career, difficulties she faced as an African American woman and the stand she took as an activist during the Civil Rights Movement
Fiction book	K-3	Riley Can Be Anything	Hamilton and Reinoso (2017)	This book follows Riley as he discovers, with the help of cousin Joe, career opportunities that family members have had, allowing him to realize he can be anything he wants to be
Non-fiction picture book	4-8	The Book Itch: Freedom, Truth, and Harlem's Greatest Bookstore	Micheaux (2015)	This book is the story of Lewis Micheaux who started the National Memorial African Bookstore in Harlem, becoming a gathering place for the community and for those standing for Black Nationalism and Civil Rights, including Langston Hughes, Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali
Fiction chapter book	4-8	Ninth Ward	Rhodes (2010)	This book is narrated by 12-year-old Lanesha, describing her life in New Orleans, Louisiana before and during the onslaught of Hurricane Katrina
Non-fiction picture book	4-8	Schomburg: The man who built a library	Weatherford (2017)	This book is the story of Arturo Schomburg, an Afro Puerto Rican collector who dedicated his life to chronicling Black heritage and history. Eventually, his collection was donated to the now famous Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York
Fiction chapter book	4-8	President of the Whole Fifth Grade	Winston (2012)	This book chronicles Brianna's runs for president of the fifth grade. After a series of bad decisions, Brianna is able to do the right thing with the election and her friends
Non-fiction chapter book	4-8	Woodson (2016)	Brown Girl Dreaming	Using poems, Woodson describes what it was like to grow up as an African American in the 1960s and 1970s in South Carolina and New York, living with the remnants of Jim Crow and a growing awareness of the Civil Rights movement

Table 2
Culturally responsive books by the title, author, book summary, genre and grade level

for African Americans (e.g. *I Love my Hair!* by Natasha Anastasia Tarpley), and referenced African American heroes, history and music (e.g. *The Book Itch: Freedom, Truth and Harlem's Greatest Bookstore* by Vaunda Micheaux Nelson; *Nina: Jazz Legend and Civil-Rights Activist Nina Simone* by Alice Briere).

Data analysis

An inductive approach was used to analyze the preliminary qualitative data (Creswell, 2012). After several readings of the researchers' anecdotal notes during the professional learning co-planning and debrief sessions, lesson observations, teachers' blog posts and teacher focus group transcriptions, the researchers highlighted and coded recurring words, phrases and patterns. During the comparison of codes across the data sets, the relationships between the codes became clearer and the researchers started to group codes with similar meanings into thematic clusters. The researchers coded all data independently, meeting subsequently to share individual interpretations and negotiate a shared understanding with any disagreements resolved through discussion until consensus was reached and mutually exclusive themes were established. Four themes were derived in response to the research question. As shown in Table 3, three themes emerged in answer to the first research question, and one dominant theme was evident in the teacher participants' responses to the second research question. As discussed below, interpretations of the four themes were made and illustrative quotes were selected from all of the participants.

Findings

To address the first research question, "How does the integration of mirror books impact teachers' literacy instructional practices?," the following three themes emerged: "Impact of teachers' racial and cultural identity on literacy instructional practices," "Teachers' increased awareness of implicit and explicit bias in the school curriculum" and "Bridges and barriers: navigating dilemmatic conversations in the classroom." In answer to the second research question, the teachers perceived that the integration of mirror books supported the students' meaning-making process, built on their culture and promoted their racial identity.

Impact of teachers' racial and cultural identity on literacy instructional practices

A few White elementary teachers admittedly felt uncomfortable with and inadequately prepared to discuss CR issues in their class because such learning was minimal in their educational training. Specifically, the teachers became aware of the overwhelming presence of Whiteness in teacher education and the omission of diverse perspectives from the official curriculum. Through whitewashed Black history narratives throughout their education, the teachers were aware of the contributions of the Black race to the culture of the USA:

I learned that there are many influential African Americans like Arturo Schomburg who have contributed to our history that I had not previously heard of or taught in my previous schooling [...] very eye opening! I am now reflecting on my own biases and knowledge of history, some of which has been omitted or whitewashed (Jody, Grade 7 White Teacher, Blog Entry).

Moreover, the White teachers shared that their own experiences did not mirror those of their African American students. Often, the teachers' difficulties were related to not knowing enough about their students' lives (i.e. lack of cultural competence). This became evident when the teachers and students engaged in whole-group discussions surrounding the mirror books they were reading. For example,

Code	Description	Theme	Example	Research question
Teachers' prior educational background/training	Lack of White teachers' training/experience in culturally relevant pedagogy (Barrier)	Bridges and barriers: Impact of Teachers' racial and cultural identity on literacy instructional practices	I learned that there are many influential African Americans who have contributed to our history that I had not previously heard of or taught in my previous schooling	How does the integration of culturally relevant books impact teachers' literacy instructional and assessment practices?
Teachers' racial/cultural identity	African American teachers were critically aware of the experiences of their students, and, as such, were able to connect with them at a deeper level (Bridge)	Bridges and barriers: Impact of Teachers' racial and cultural identity on literacy instructional practices	One of my students was reluctant to discuss her father who was incarcerated. But I had the same issue growing up. I shared my experience that my father had also been incarcerated and it made my student more comfortable	How does the integration of culturally relevant books impact teachers' literacy instructional and assessment practices?
Implicit/explicit bias	Teachers became increasingly conscious of the implicit biases inherent in the school curriculum which subsequently impacted and informed their curricular decisions such as book selections (Bridge)	Bridges and barriers: Impact of Teachers' racial and cultural identity on literacy instructional practices	I realized how important it is for my students to be able to see themselves in the book and to have strong, positive role models that "look like them" to look up to and relate to	How does the integration of culturally relevant books impact teachers' literacy instructional and assessment practices?
Dilemmatic conversations	Lack of White teachers' training/experience in culturally relevant pedagogy resulted in feelings of discomfort/stress; avoidance of difficult conversations on race (Barrier)	Bridges and barriers: Impact of Teachers' racial and cultural identity on literacy instructional practices	I am still afraid and uncomfortable with and avoid having these open discussions about race	How does the integration of culturally relevant books impact teachers' literacy instructional and assessment practices?
Students' racial/cultural identity (self-identity)	Positive self-identity and connections made when students read stories that related to their own experiences	Supporting Meaning Making: Building on Students' Racial and Cultural Identities through Culturally Relevant Texts	My students are so into the story <i>I Love My Hair</i> . They're always sharing personal stories and making text-to-self connections like wiping oil off their foreheads	How does the integration of culturally relevant books impact students' literacy learning as perceived by teachers?

Table 3
Sample thematic analysis

Some of the questions and things that they would talk about are things that I didn't realize that they have to deal with on a daily basis. It gave me a new perspective as to what some of these kids are dealing with at home (Carol, Grade 5/6 White Teacher, Blog Professional Learning Debrief Session).

One of my challenges is creating a space for a culturally responsive classroom because of where I come from. My upbringing is much different. My experience had put blinders on me to things that I didn't even know I had blinders on about. I didn't know until I knew. Now I'm looking through a lens that I never would have even thought of. I wasn't taught that at home. I've been trying to do

Bridges and barriers: navigating dilemmatic conversations in the classroom

Many teachers, in particular White teachers, enter the field with little experience in diverse racial context and possess a marginal understanding of institutional racism. Because of this inexperience or lack of knowledge, often questions or comments about race from students were ignored or raised discomfort. For some White teachers, their lack of sufficient background knowledge, experience and training on how to engage students in difficult conversations about race and racism was perceived as barriers, which subsequently led to behaviors such as silence as well as feelings of discomfort and race-based stress, particularly among White teachers. Even when Mary had good intentions, she avoided or ignored student comments about race and racism when she read the story, *Nina: Jazz Legend and Civil-Rights Activist Nina Simone* to her first grade students,

I learned a lot. The most surprising thing was how uncomfortable I became when I didn't know how I should answer some of their questions in regards to the story. I am afraid I don't know enough about that part of history and looking uncomfortable. As a teacher, you feel that you should know everything. I am still afraid, uncomfortable with and avoid having these open discussions about race (Mary, Grade 1, White Teacher, Blog Entry).

As noted by most of the participating teachers, this approach to pedagogy and addressing difficult subjects such as systemic racism was daunting. Most of the White elementary teachers found it difficult at times to manage and address controversial topics in their classrooms, as they had to consider and be responsive to the possible sources of student views, including family members, social media and their own personal identities.

You could tell that the kids who were very engaged have been exposed to it at home and do have conversations about it at home, and the ones who react like "Ahh!" it makes me feel uncomfortable because I am thinking I am exposing them to something and if I discuss it then I am afraid I will get into trouble, so do I shut this down? (Meredith, Kindergarten White Teacher, Professional Learning Debrief Session).

The following primary grade teachers felt that their students were too young to learn about racism and bias, and did not have the cognitive ability to understand social issues and real-world challenges:

My Kindergarten students used the word unfair a lot. They say things like, "So you wouldn't be allowed to be our teacher?" They could not understand that. We did get into that conversation about segregation, "No I wouldn't be able to be your teacher because we would be going to different schools back then." I could have gotten deeper into the conversation, but I don't know what level to go to in Kindergarten, it is hard to find that balance. We talk about unfairness and how things used to be and how things are still unfair, but I don't think they truly understand the severity of it. Some students are really engaged in the conversation, but I find that others aren't taking it as seriously as I would like them to and aren't getting it (Loretta, Kindergarten White Teacher, Professional Learning Debrief Session).

In the story, *Fancy Party Gowns*, they were very excited about her creativity and determination but the part that sparked the whole conversation was when she got to the front door and she could not go in. They could not believe this and could not understand why she could not go in the front door. So I was trying to explain our history to 6 year olds who don't know racism, in this country, they don't grasp the concept that Black people were not into the same door as Black people [...] that her name was not known for so many years also sparked conversation and

discussion in my first grade classroom (Mary, Grade 1 White Teacher, Professional Learning Debrief Session).

For other teachers, the use of mirror books to teach about and relate African American history to current events presented an opportunity for politically charged topics to arise in class discussions. The ongoing discrimination and violence that the students were witnessing either through media or experienced within their own communities was acknowledged and critically examined by some of the participating teachers:

After we read *Book Itch* and discussed some of the events that happened in the book like the shooting and Malcolm X, we talked about how that would be perceived and handled in the community today. In the book, there was a time when they were all gathering and a couple of cops showed up. My students were saying that if there was a gathering now, there would be a lot more police activity. So, we talked about racial identity. How things have changed and how it is now in their own community (Carol, Grade 5/6 White Teacher, Focus Group Session).

Teachers' increased awareness of implicit and explicit bias in the school curriculum

As a function of participating in this PD, the teachers became increasingly conscious of the implicit biases that were inherent in the school curriculum. The books that were previously chosen for students prior to participating in this PD reflected the teachers' own White middle-class values and culture. These teachers did not seem to identify the bias in their views of their students or book selections, nor did they recognize the need for their students to experience a mirror book that would better support their comprehension as compared with a less CR text. As evidenced in the quotes below, Katie and Melissa now critically and selectively choose books that better mirrored their students' lives in positive contexts and roles:

I continue to look for texts and novels that have children or people that look like the students who are reading them (Muslim, Black, Hispanic, etc.). I will make sure that I continue to give my students the voice to speak about their racial identity going forward (Melissa, Grade 4 White Teacher, Blog Entry).

I would previously pick award-winning books published by Scholastic so it must be good, or reading non-fiction and thinking all that is written is true. But now I am more conscious choosing books. When you actually start evaluating these books, you realize they present a deficit model, with a non-White protagonist written by a White author. You want them to be authentic and written from an insider's perspective, not an outsider. I am now looking for more African American authors (Katie, Grade 2 White Teacher, Blog Entry).

Katie wanted to disrupt myths of poor and diverse communities by modeling using culturally affirming language and selecting mirror books with positive role models for her students:

I am more aware of the literature that I share with my students. I realized how important it is for my students to be able to see themselves in the book and to have strong, positive role models that "look like them" to look up to and relate to (Katie, Grade 2 White Teacher, Blog Entry).

As a function of participation in this study, the teachers began to question and consider the authenticity and cultural relevance when selecting literacy assessments, such as running records, and compare students' results before making instructional decisions:

One of the running records had a story about a White family playing soccer. My children struggled with the passage. They are not familiar with the sport, they did not know the rules, and they didn't know that you can't touch the ball with your hands. You needed so much prior knowledge to answer the questions. This discrepancy has become clearer, that this was what we were testing them on (Meredith, Kindergarten White Teacher, Blog Entry).

Daria shares the following account of overt racism which recently occurred at her godson's school and perpetuated racial stereotyping:

I was just talking to my godson's mom. Their family just moved to Houston, TX. They just started school and it was Spirit Week. My girlfriend called me three days ago and said "I'm heartbroken. They just had Thug Day at school" (Daria, Grade 1 Black Teacher, Focus Group Session).

Supporting meaning making: building on students' racial and cultural identities through mirror books

Self-identity was often evident while the students read the stories that related to their own experiences which prompted and sparked unsolicited connections, discussion and engagement among and relationships between students.

My kids will just offer information. For example in *Bud Not Buddy*, he's looking for his dad. My students talked about not knowing their dad, and I'll talk about similarities in the boy's life and places he might go to their own life. My students related to the struggles and triumphs that the characters went through (Researcher's Anecdotal Notes, Professional Learning Debrief Session).

My students are so into the story *I Love My Hair*. They're always sharing personal stories and making text-to-self connections like wiping oil off their foreheads (Amy, Grade 2 White Teacher, Professional Learning Debrief Session).

It really helped to build relationships in my class. Students were able to have meaningful discussions with each other around characters they could relate to, specifically, in *The Book I Ch*. It sparked conversation about why the character refused to give up in the face of adversity, hardships, and racism (Jessica, Grade 4 White Teacher Blog Entry).

My kids have been having discussions about the books, especially because they made connections with the characters in *Fancy Party Gowns*, especially Ann Cole Lowe. They were like, "I am creative too. I can do this." Connections between self and the character were really evident. The students were excited to see and hear a story about themselves (Mary, Grade 1 White Teacher, Focus Group Session).

The White teachers were not able to articulate the same or similar cultural experiences and racial background as their Black teacher colleagues, who were critically aware of their students' experiences and experienced a shared identity with their students. Britney was able to connect with their students at a deeper level during their read-aloud discussions around the mirror book, *Brown Girl Dreaming*:

One of my students was reluctant to discuss her father who was incarcerated. But I had the same issue growing up. I shared my experience that my father had also been incarcerated and it made my student more comfortable. We talked about different family configurations-one parent or grandparent caring for the children. Because I share information about myself, I am creating that culturally responsive classroom (Iris, Grade 5/6 Black Teacher, Focus Group Session).

Several of the teachers in this study acknowledged, identified and embraced being Black or African American which was a source of pride and strength. Although the literature needed to be credible, the teachers (especially the Black teachers) in this study wanted it to be positive and affirming. As illustrated in the quotes below, these teachers helped their students develop positive feelings about their own racial and cultural identity:

My students once said to me, “You’re dark skinned” I would respond with, “Oh yes, and dark is beautiful!” I would go above and beyond, and exaggerate how awesome it is to be a chocolate lady and tell them that I wouldn’t want to be anything else! I would turn it into this spectacular thing because what they do encounter is a lot of negativity (Britney, Grade 3 Black Teacher, Focus Group Session).

I try to bring in as much positivity around race. When we talk about Black people throughout history, it usually refers to slavery, the Jim Crow era, racism and negativity, but in those times there were beautiful moments and I try to pull those out (Britney, Grade 3 Black Teacher, Focus Group Session).

As a Black person I want them to know that they are amazing, and can do anything they want. I flip and try to make it about self-love. . .that is the important piece. Yes, these things happened but will you be like that? How can you change the world? (Daria, Grade 1 Black Teacher, Focus Group Session).

I read *One Crazy Summer* with my 8–9 year olds. I found out about their own personal identity and self-hatred. . .it was very eye opening. While reading this text, I had at least five girls say, “My skin is dirty, we don’t like that” and that “lighter skinned people were better.” With these concepts, I really had to help them understand the text and themselves, because how they were seeing themselves in the text was very telling. . .you have to connect to their own personal identity at this age. I had to pull in real life situations and teach them about love, empathy, and sympathy (Kristen, Grade 3 White Teacher, Focus Group Session).

For students who were experiencing difficult situations (i.e. parental incarceration), having the opportunity to read about others who had solved similar problems allowed them to observe the story’s options and then consider viable alternatives for themselves.

Discussion

To address the first research question, and as a function of participating in the PD on CRP and integrating mirror books in their literacy instruction, the White teachers in this study realized that they possessed limited racial knowledge and lacked awareness of their Whiteness (Au *et al.*, 2016; Sleeter, 2017). Subsequently, both the White teachers in this study articulated gaps in their background knowledge, substantiating Blanchett’s (2006) assertion that teachers enter public school classrooms unprepared to effectively teach African American and other students of color. These teachers lacked racial consciousness about themselves and possessed far less racial consciousness regarding others outside their cultural groups (Hayes and Juarez, 2012) previously.

Through uncritical and whitewashed Black history narratives throughout K-12 history education (Thornhill, 2016), teachers complete education without any idea of the part which the Black race has played in America. This was revealed in the study’s findings; for example; many of the teachers (both White and Black) were unfamiliar with most of the famous African American figures discussed in the mirror books. This mis-education has consequences to how teachers teach Black students. The books that were chosen for students prior to participating in this PD reflected their own White middle-class values and

culture. These teachers did not seem to identify the bias in their views of their students or book selections, nor did they recognize the need for their students to experience a mirror book that would better support their comprehension as compared with a less CR text. As such, the teachers previously perpetuated the tradition of selecting texts that reflected their own culture and values (Williams, 2014). However, as a result of participating in this PD and integrating mirror books in their literacy instruction, the teachers engaged in a process of critical reflection.

Consequently, the students who made personal connections while reading the mirror books used in this study were better able to understand the text they were reading which made them more engaged in the reading experience (McNair and Bishop, 2018, 2014; Rosenblatt, 1978 Zoch, 2017; Zygmunt *et al.*, 2015). As evidenced in this study, students who identified with a story's characters were able to make solicited and unsolicited connections during reading. The students obtained information about their identity through portrayals of "people like them" in the authentic books they read (McNair and Bishop, 2018).

CRP requires critically and racially conscious teachers who reintegrate marginalized knowledge into teaching to combat racism (Matias, 2013). Love *et al.* (2016) recognize that difficult conversations are needed to address historical and contemporary issues related to police violence, segregation, disparity and institutional racism. As shown in this study, this was a challenging feat as the teachers made a concerted effort to balance themes of victimization and oppression, perseverance and resistance, constantly acknowledging and highlighting Black agency and subtle forms of resistance without trivializing the multitude of tragedies and setbacks that African Americans have encountered for centuries.

The teachers realized that although they modeled instructional conversations with mirror books, they did not explicitly model conversations focused on race, equity and social justice. Even when integrating these texts in instruction, however, some of the (primary) White teachers avoided topics of race and racism in their instruction and discussions of the mirror books. This finding aligns with Ladson-Billings' (2017) assertion that this is the most ignored tenet of CRP. Thus, we are much to blame regarding the lack of development of critical consciousness (Love *et al.*, 2016). Unplanned explorations into unfamiliar territory were a challenge and more easily avoided. These teachers were faced with the same misleading messages and a Eurocentric curriculum that most likely was part of their schooling experience (Christ and Sharma, 2018). Many teachers, in particular White teachers, enter the field with little experience in diverse racial context and have a marginal understanding of institutional racism (Sleeter, 2017). Because of this inexperience or lack of knowledge, often, questions or comments about race from students are ignored or raise discomfort. Often, teachers avoid planning curriculum with even a marginal focus on race and racism. The hesitation that some White teachers felt may stem from their own issues rather than any difficulty children may have in exploring the topic (DiAngelo, 2012; Husband, 2010). Shaped by their own experiences with issues of race and racism (DiAngelo, 2012; Husband, 2010; Vittrup, 2016), teachers may hold differing views regarding the appropriateness of teaching about this topic in the early childhood classroom.

Facing examples of inequality and racial stereotyping (i.e. Thug day) coupled with a new awareness of the racism in our surroundings can cause feelings of guilt, especially for White people (Sleeter, 2017). Many teachers do not have a theoretical framework to unpack the role of race and racism in US history (Sleeter, 2017), which also affected their ability to analyze the intersection of racism in contemporary events, such as police violence. In an effort to minimize this barrier, some teachers tried to familiarize themselves with student demographics, student and school/campus culture and student preparation prior to asking students to step into these difficult conversations about race and racism with one another

(Love *et al.*, 2016). The primary grade teachers were also concerned and questioned whether their students should be shielded from learning explicitly about race and racial differences (Husband, 2010). Although unpleasant experiences may be commonplace in the young lives of impoverished urban children, our findings suggest that such realities might be minimized rather than emphasized in early literacy activities for this population.

In answer to the second research question, many of the stories used in this study supported children's social emotional growth, focusing on topics such as self-identity and resilience (Durlak *et al.*, 2011). According to the teacher participants, when the story characters had a similar appearance, cultural background and experience, this facilitated students' text comprehension while concomitantly strengthening their self-identity (Horning, 2014; Klefstad and Martinez, 2013). The teachers in this study believed that providing their students with opportunities to see themselves and their culture in their books built cultural esteem and a sense of community in their classroom (McNair and Bishop, 2018).

Implications for practice

This study's findings uncover the need for teachers to expand their racial consciousness and to examine who they are and how their beliefs shape their instructional decisions. Therefore, it is important for teacher educators to examine what preservice teachers know about Black history to better prepare them to teach in culturally and racially diverse schools. Studies on Whiteness and White supremacy not only should be included, they should also explore more pedagogical ways, such as autobiographical storytelling, to get the majority of White preservice and in-service teachers involved in a process of antiracist, socially just education by engaging in courageous conversations and self-reflecting on their journey learning about race and White Supremacy. Teachers and teacher educators should engage in critical self-reflection regarding their own identity positions, personal experiences and implicit biases, as well as anticipate student resistance to difficult dialogue. It is important that White teachers and White teacher educators must have the emotional strength to withstand the discomfort with self-interrogating Whiteness.

This study's findings emphasized the need for children's literature to be positive and affirming, but even the troubling aspects should be thoroughly discussed, empowering children and helping children to understand ways that they and others in their environment could problem-solve to make things better. This is true for all children and is critical for the disengaged, low-performing learner. Issues of fairness and justice may need to become an explicit part of the literacy instruction, especially for text with relationship and social justice overlays, as supported by Ladson-Billings's (1995) goal of instilling "critical consciousness" through the use of such CR material as mirror books (Bishop, 2007).

The study's findings also underscore the importance of taking into consideration authenticity in light of the function of the literature in the readers' lives. Authenticity can be determined by the sociocultural practices of the children, families and communities in the classroom.

The findings of this study suggest that mirror books which incorporate the students' background may aid in student engagement because students are able to draw upon their culturally acquired background knowledge to better comprehend texts. Thus, to engage, motivate, affirm and promote students' literacy success, teachers need to possess knowledge of their students' culture and heritage, as well as their background, language and life experiences. Teachers might conduct brief informal assessments and interviews of their students to determine the congruence between their students' background and classroom reading materials and the degree to which students identify with the texts. Ignoring cultural

relevance when evaluating students' literacy performance might underestimate readers' competencies and misdiagnose their instructional needs. It is suggested that teachers might:

- assess the cultural relevance of the text for the reader being tested;
- ask the reader to rate the cultural relevance of places and experiences in the text; and
- consider the cultural relevance of each text when evaluating the reader's performance.

Further, when a student performs poorly on a passage that has little cultural relevance, a teacher might assess the child with a passage that is more CR and compare the results before making instructional decisions. To deepen teachers' understanding about their students' perceptions of the cultural relevance of texts, teachers should engage students by helping them to select CR texts whenever possible.

Conclusion

Based on this study's findings, several questions can be explored in future research. Qualitative methods were applied to examine the research question. Therefore, future research can use a mixed-methods approach (quantitative research design such as correlational research) or conduct a longitudinal study to explore the predictive factors associated with the development of CR pedagogues and the resulting effects of using CR literature on students' literacy learning by means of achievement test (i.e. reading comprehension) scores. Research can also explore how teachers and cultural experts within the community can work together to effectively introduce and teach young children about diverse cultures within the local community and beyond.

The results of this study are bracketed by the context of one elementary school in the USA. Future research can explore how other countries implement CRP across diverse educational and school settings (e.g. community educational programs, private schools, public schools, majority native/refugee/immigrant populations) and explore best practices in preparing teachers to become CR pedagogues. Scholarship chronicling how facets of CR pedagogies can be used by teachers is also needed to accentuate issues related to gender and sexual difference.

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