

It's Not Indoctrination, It's Criticality: Using Curriculum to Explore Complex Ideas Around Race and Social Justice

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Abstract

This article addresses the challenges and importance of integrating discussions on race and social justice into the classroom. Considering recent legislative actions in various states aimed at restricting such discussions, the article presents an empowering framework designed to support educators in facilitating these conversations. This framework, rooted in culturally responsive pedagogy, offers practical tools and guiding questions to help teachers create an environment that encourages inquiry and exploration of racial complexities without imposing personal viewpoints. The framework aims to move beyond simply identifying disparities to examining systems of oppression and encouraging students to take action. Feedback from teachers who implemented this framework shows significant improvements in their comfort and proficiency in discussing racial issues with students, instilling a sense of confidence and capability. The article also highlights the importance of self-reflection and continuous learning for teachers to lead these conversations effectively. It underscores the need for educators to develop strategies that allow students to engage critically with racial topics and employ counter-narratives to challenge discriminatory rhetoric. In conclusion, the article calls for a concerted effort in teacher education to counteract the resistance to racial equity discussions.

Introduction

On May 12, 2023, a teacher in Florida was under investigation for showing the movie *Strange World*. The plot involves a father and son exploring their relationship while attempting to save the world. Sounds harmless, right? Well, the act of showing the film violated Florida's "anti-woke" and "don't say gay" legislation, as the film features a bi-racial character with a Black mother and White father who also identifies as gay. Unfortunately, this suppression of diverse content continues to become the norm as America leans further and further into its white supremacy roots. Educators currently face uncertainty and fear about what they can say when teaching and discussing race and racism in the classroom because of recent legislation that 35 states have passed or proposed. Such legislation silences teachers' speech on race and attempts to ban books written by Black authors or about people of color (Alfonseca, 2022; American Library Association, 2021).

Supplementing the literacy curriculum requires educators to deeply understand the curriculum, learning processes, social environment, and literature. These choices also require the teacher to take risks since they diverge from the predefined curriculum and explore subjects and ideas that might alter the conventional curriculum (Flores et al., 2019). Teachers must provide opportunities for student discussions that lead to understanding the complexity of race and racism (Price-Dennis & Sealey-Ruiz, 2021). Teachers must actively engage students in critical conversations and be alert to the emergence of racist beliefs in discussions and texts (Sealey-Ruiz, 2021).

Few examples exist of racialized discussions that provide specific guidance for teachers on how to use facilitation tactics to enhance their students' racial literacy. We introduce a novel framework that supports educators in engaging in discussions about race and racism, with

literature as a focal point. Furthermore, we provide evidence of how this framework develops teachers' capabilities and expertise while also improving classroom instructional practices, specifically in the area of academic discourse.

The Framework

During a recent coaching conversation, a teacher expressed that he received significant pushback from parents when students read *All American Boys* (Reynolds & Kiely, 2017). This novel tells the story of two teenage male friends, one Black and the other White, and how their everyday experiences based on race differ, particularly around policing. The teacher taught this unit in the wake of George Floyd's murder. This teacher shared that he explicitly attempted to have students appreciate the problems within police departments as institutions and their role in communities of color. This teacher sought to provide a vehicle for his students to explore and discuss racial complexities without teaching a personal viewpoint, as often happens with traditional class lectures. The aim of this article is to encourage teachers to consider how they can avoid coming across as didactic and instead create opportunities for inquiry and investigation.

Our goal is to establish a pedagogical environment where teachers can comfortably engage in reflective discussions about race and its impact on their educational efforts. We envision a society in which individuals feel at ease discussing racial and identity-related issues in order to examine and take action toward dismantling oppressive systems. We encourage teachers to embrace the guiding question: How can I create an environment for my students to explore intricate subjects about race and identity without imposing my viewpoints?

Teachers should begin with a thematic unit plan that links all learning to a central topic and provides students with the opportunity to investigate, research, and engage in project-based

learning experiences. We created a curriculum framework for teachers using the premises of Gholdy Muhammad's book *Cultivating Genius* (2020) and the original pillars of Gloria Ladson-Billings' culturally relevant pedagogy (2009). The framework provides teachers with comprehension and discussion questions that enhance students' grasp of the texts while simultaneously tackling equity concerns. The objective is to surpass the mere identification of disparities and instead delve into the examination of systems of oppression. McAnuff Gumbs articulates that “teachers might need support in ways of digging beyond surface levels to foster conversation that allows students to exert resilience and openness when confronted with their bias and the biases of others.” (2020, p. 112). This framework assists educators by offering explicit resources to enhance their understanding of racial literacy and enable instruction in their classrooms. Without a toolkit of resources, teachers might assume that they can engage in culturally responsive teaching simply by presenting texts that raise race or social justice issues. We laud any desire to foster cultural competence within classrooms; however, a more structured and intentional approach is crucial to truly shifting classrooms away from historically white-dominant learning spaces and mindsets (Okun, 2021).

Table 1 provides guiding questions for teachers to use in designing culturally responsive unit plans.

Table 1. Guiding Questions for Unit Plan Design

Identify Unit Objectives	Determine Acceptable Evidence	Plan Learning Experiences and Instruction	Social Justice and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP)
<p>Consider the plot and characters' experiences in the chosen text.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What should students have learned about themselves at the end of the text? • What connections can students make between the characters and 	<p>Identify a text-based call to action.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How will I know that students have considered the implications and themes of the text provided? • How might I use non-traditional modes of assessment to allow students to explain what 	<p>Center performance tasks and daily objectives on the novel's themes in addition to academic skills.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do I design performance tasks that extend beyond traditional modes of measuring student comprehension? 	<p>Note evidence and real-world scenarios that speak to the ideas being explored in the text.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What resources or supplemental pieces of literature reinforce the themes of the text? • How can students connect what they read with their daily lives? • How can the unit

<p>their lives, lived experiences, and identities?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can I expand the teachings of racial or social justice beyond academic or literary standards? 	<p>they have learned?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How might I include student choice and voice in the learning outcomes? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do learning objectives emphasize themes from the text in addition to standards/skills? • How can I reconcile the instruction of academic standards with the exploration of social justice issues in the novel? 	<p>support aspirations around social justice and culturally responsive sustaining education (CR-SE)?</p>
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As discussed in the next portion of this article, there is a profound impact on student learning when teachers have an obvious structure to be reflective and intentional when planning their instruction on race and racism.

Teacher learnings and feedback on the framework

Several New York City schools received literacy units developed through this framework, which were provided to kindergarten through 6th-grade teachers in spring 2023. During twelve

weeks, students completed tasks that provided opportunities for learning demonstrations beyond the usual modes of assessment, such as the three-paragraph essay. According to Rudine Sims Bishop's (1990) research on multicultural children's literature, children should have the chance to see themselves in stories and literary curricula, learn about other people, and experience life from another's perspective. These units included culturally responsive texts that showcased various authentic lived experiences, highlighting students' identities (*mirrors*), and offering insights into the experiences of others (*windows and sliding glass doors*). These units also specified the expected results as performance tasks or student projects, provided concrete sample evidence of learning that teachers could gather, and addressed complex issues like gentrification, standards of beauty, and colorism.

To support instruction, the organization in this framework offered teachers guiding questions for facilitating classroom discussions. Teachers received resources and prompts to support their instructional decisions and create an environment where students could listen to these stories, participate, and synthesize the novels. This included tools to help children respond to racist concepts and deeply address social justice issues. There were examples provided of moves teachers could make during discussions. For example, adding to a student's comments, rephrasing a student's comments, correcting student misconceptions, and highlighting information within texts that diverge from the dominant ideology. This framework also offered teachers resources to deepen their understanding of race and help them teach children essential, racialized knowledge to build criticality.

It is important to emphasize that we should encourage teachers not to impose their personal opinions on students. Instead, they should allow students to examine racism and social justice-related ideas in literature through purposeful investigation. The aim is for educators to

impart to their students the notion that the world is still developing, that favorable transformation is attainable, and that they possess the capability to initiate action. Teachers can facilitate educational transformation. Teachers, as public intellectuals, can offer a thorough theoretical examination of the technocratic and instrumental ideologies that underpin educational ideas outside of the process of conceiving, organizing, and creating curricula (Giroux, 2013).

Using various books as a springboard for racialized discussions, rather than downplaying or silencing the social justice topic of each text, these teachers encouraged their students to discuss the racial systemic structures that formed the foundation of each book. These units were intersectional, layered, and recursive. According to teachers, the application of these units of study increased:

- student exposure to various cultures, lived experiences, and perspectives
- students' sense of agency to act, and
- forums for discussions on systematic racism and preconceived notions.

Figure 1 demonstrates that 80% of teachers felt more at ease talking about racial issues with their students after using this framework. Figure 2 shows that 75% of teachers strongly agreed that they are now better equipped to include discussions of social justice, racism, and racial issues in their lessons after their experience with our framework.

FIGURE 1:

Percentage of teachers feeling more comfortable having race conversations with students

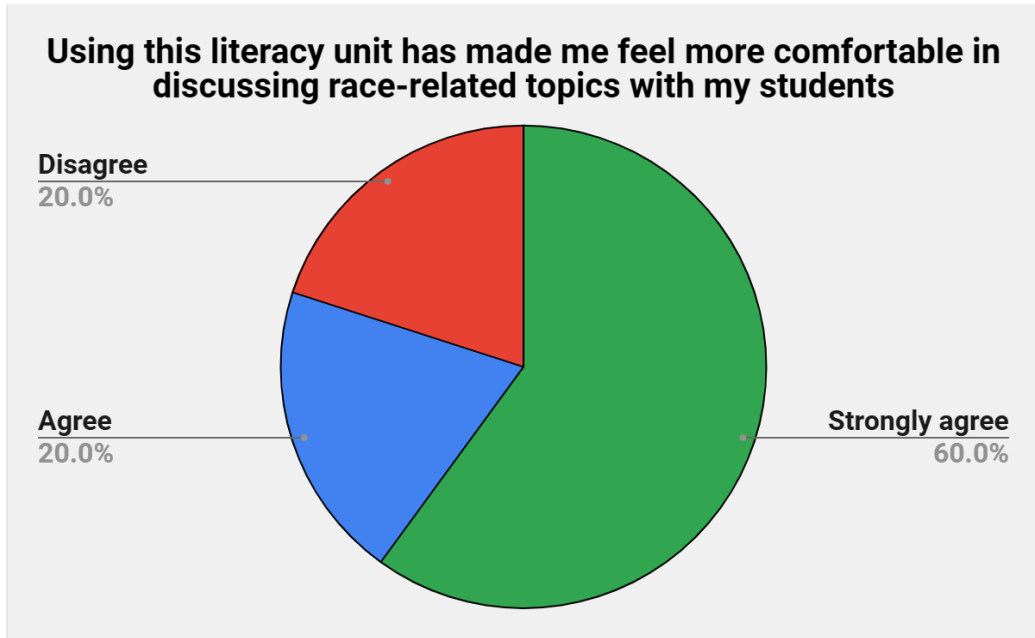
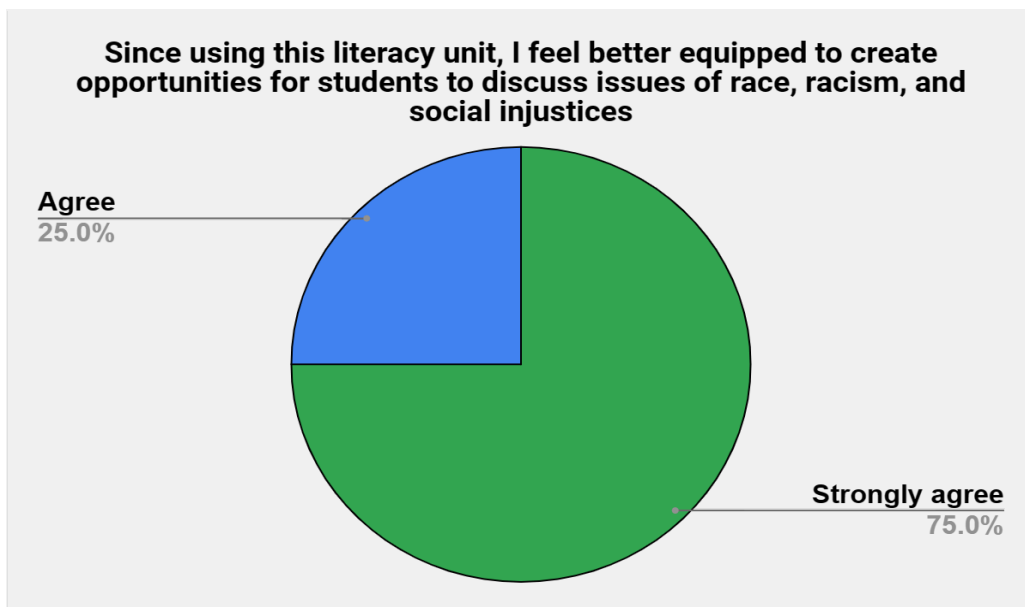


FIGURE 2:

Percentage of teachers feeling better equipped to incorporate issues of race



The research presented in Figures 1 and 2 offers evidence of the efficacy of this particular framework in improving teachers' assurance and proficiency in dealing with racial matters in their classrooms. The data presented in Figure 1 shows that 80% of teachers feel more at ease

discussing racial topics with their students. Figure 2 demonstrates that 75% of teachers feel more confident incorporating discussions of social justice, racism, and racial issues into their curriculum. These findings highlight the significant impact of the framework on bringing about positive change. These findings show that providing educators with a well-defined and explicit method to examine these crucial subjects promotes more effective communication and cultivates a more inclusive and empathetic classroom. The framework functions as a tool to equip teachers to facilitate difficult, complex, and sometimes uncomfortable discussions about race and racism, ultimately enhancing empathy and awareness in the educational environment.

Implications for Research

The ability to lead literature-based discussions or dialogical pedagogy that allows students to learn and discuss the impact of racism on their lives is difficult for many teachers. Many feel unprepared for having difficult, critical dialogues on race with their students, and some feel uncomfortable guiding discussions on subjects they don't fully understand or have not shared similar lived experiences (Milner, 2017). It may be easier—and more comfortable—to guide discussions away from talking about race and toward other identity-related topics, such as gender or socioeconomic status. Teachers must become familiar with strategies that reframe discussions of race while examining the intersectionality of identity so they can offer meaningful opportunities for students to engage.

For robust race-oriented conversations, teachers must engage in self-work to unpack their understanding of race as it manifests in their daily lives. Teachers must learn new strategies for assisting students in listening to, engaging in, and analyzing racial conversations. Such strategies include opportunities for their students to listen to stories, participate, and synthesize the narratives offered in literacy studies. Teachers also need to improve their ability to assist students

in using counter-narratives to confront racist and discriminatory rhetoric. Additionally, teachers need guidance and coaching in order to help their students acquire critical race knowledge.

Conclusion

In the wake of worldwide demonstrations for Black Lives, efforts to achieve greater racial equity are encountering resistance and violence throughout the United States. Recent events demonstrate how discussions about race and racism are difficult to tolerate for many who choose to outlaw books that discuss racism, stifle equity reforms by demonizing critical race theory, and put pressure on school districts to fire educators or other teachers who they believe are indoctrinating students into pro-justice ideologies (Morgan, 2022). Those of us who are involved in teacher education must counteract these tactics. The geopolitical facts of 2024 make it essential for children to talk about race and understand how race affects their schools, communities, and homes. These discussions are best had within their classrooms when their teachers are well-equipped to facilitate them.

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Bios

María Luisa García Underwood has accumulated over three decades of experience in education. María Luisa has held positions as a classroom teacher, instructional coach/staff developer, and program/district administrator. She served as the Director of the Multicultural Education Center, where she developed and supervised diversity education. She has worked as an administrator in various institutions of higher education, including Teachers College, Columbia University's Institute for Urban and Minority Education (IUME). María works with K-12 educators in the areas of literacy, second language acquisition, and special education. María has created culturally responsive curricula to help K-12 teachers transform and root literacy instruction with anti-racist pedagogy and social justice standards. She has made many presentations for the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD), and the National Association for Bilingual Education (NABE). María earned a Bachelor of Arts in Early Childhood and Elementary Education from Fairleigh Dickinson University, a Master of Science in Education in Learning Sciences from the University of Pennsylvania, an Education Master in Reading and Bilingual Education from Teachers College, Columbia University, and a Master of Arts in Special Education with a specialization in Learning Disabilities from the same institution. María is currently a doctoral candidate at the University of Pennsylvania, focusing on anti-racist pedagogy and learning design in teacher preparation programs.

Dr. Reshma Ramkellawan-Arteaga has the crux of her expertise nested in secondary literacy instruction. But she has also supported Math and Science teachers with their pedagogy and curriculum planning. Her interests and expertise include digital and media literacy, curriculum development, staff and leadership coaching, and education research. Reshma has served as an assistant principal for a prominent New York City charter network. She has over 12 years of experience in the educational field, serving in the roles of teacher, mentor, team leader and staff developer. During the 2012 to 2013 school year, Reshma participated in the National Academy of Advanced Teacher Education (NAATE) program to refine her skills as a teacher leader. In 2016, she worked in the New York City Department of Teaching and Leadership, helping to redesign the Principal Candidate Pool assessment. She received her undergraduate degree in Secondary English Language Arts Education from the University of Central Florida. In 2009 and 2011, she earned her Master of Arts in Curriculum and Teaching and Master in Education in the Teaching of English from Teachers College, Columbia University. Dr. Ramkellawan also earned her Ed.D in English Education from Teachers College, Columbia University.