

Using Children's Literature to Advance Antiracist Early Childhood Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

All too often, race and equity are not discussed in early childhood contexts for fear that children are too young or innocent to grapple with such topics. In this yearlong action research study, I examine how children's literature can be used to implement an antiracist pedagogy in early childhood classrooms. Through the enactment of a critical children's literature teacher inquiry group, I examine the relationship between the use of diverse children's literature and a teacher's development as a social justice educator. Over the course of the academic year, the eight teachers received books written for young children that explicitly addressed diversity, equity, and justice. Through participation in the inquiry group and the opportunity to deeply examine children's books, teachers further developed into their identities as educators committed to social justice. This research sheds light on how teachers can be actively engaged in a teaching practice that disrupts patterns of inequity by bringing meaningful and relevant content into the lives of all the children in their classrooms. Findings also provide recent examples of antiracist early childhood texts.

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Introduction

In recent years, early childhood teacher education programs have turned attention towards advancing preparation practices to support antiracist early childhood classrooms (Allen et al., 2021). Kendi (2019) argues that the opposite of racist is not 'not racist.' Rather, the opposite is antiracist, one who actively works to eliminate systemic, organizational, and political racism (p.8). An early childhood educator's identities anchor how one perceives and enacts entry into the profession (Nieto & Bode, 2012; Tatum, 1992). While my entrance into the field of early education predates the term antiracist, I did enter the professional with a particular commitment towards teaching in school communities where the students shared my identity as a Black, Indigenous, Person of Color (BIPOC). My Black family shares the perspective that Harris (1992) notes, that one's ability to read embodies "the power of literacy to effect essential political, cultural, social, and economic change" (p. 276). Thus, for my family and many other Black families, early literacy development signaled meaning beyond oneself towards a practice that symbolizes liberation, joy, and freedom. Therefore, in my history and within the context of early childhood teaching and learning, children's literature plays a prominent and recurring role.

To be an antiracist early childhood educator requires a deep understanding of how racism is operationalized and enacted in the lives and experiences of children. Early childhood literacy curriculum, policies, and research is a human artifact and reflects the ideologies and assumptions of humans who define what does and does not count as valued. Approximately 83% of the teaching workforce in the United States is White, despite a nation with significant projected growth of non-White populations between 2014-2060 (Colby & Ortmon, 2015). Escayg (2020) writes, "White teachers, through the element of White privilege, reinscribe dominant racial meanings by constructing a classroom environment that reifies Whiteness as the standard and as the norm" (p. 3).

The careful selection of children's literature, both in the home and school environment, has long been understood as a hallmark of a young child's emergent literacy experience (i.e., Heath, 1982; Newman, 1996; Strickland & Morrow, 1989). As children's literature plays a central role in a child's classroom literacy development, this article examines how it can be used to support antiracist pedagogy in classrooms. Using an antiracist pedagogy framework, I describe the findings of a research

study that sought to understand how children's literature could be used to support educators' understanding of culturally responsive pedagogy and how it might be instrumental in the development of an identity as social justice educators in California classrooms. Only once educators have examined the longstanding structures of inequity that dominated early literacy pedagogy are we prepared to, then, consider the pivotal role books can also play in enacting an antiracist pedagogy in early childhood classrooms.

An Antiracist Framework in Early Childhood

While the field of early childhood education, both in its scholarly and professional arenas, has long valued multicultural and "anti-bias" perspectives (Derman-Sparks et al., 2020; Souto-Manning, 2013), the idea of an antiracist framework in early childhood is considerably less examined. The field has long used critical theories and post-modern perspectives to challenge broader systems such as developmentally appropriate practices (i.e., Greishaber & Cannella, 2001; Yelland, 2005), yet less explored is the everyday racism occurring in classrooms. Oluo (2019) defines racism as "any prejudice against someone because of their race, when those views are reinforced by systems of power" (p. 26). The lived experiences of young children remain profoundly unequal.

To be an antiracist early childhood educator, one must accept that someone can be child-centered and unintentionally practice everyday racism with young children (Kailin, 2002). According to Kendi (2019), an antiracist is "one who is supporting an antiracist policy through their actions or expressing an antiracist idea" (p. 13). Policies and curricula have long positioned language and literacy development as a tenet within our field. And, reading books aloud to children is considered one of the most valuable aspects of the early literacy environment (Bredenkemp & Copple, 2009; Sulzby & Teale, 1991). Hoffman and colleagues (2015) aptly point out that "not all read-alouds are created equal" (p.8). They point to the following considerations when selecting a text to read aloud: thematically rich issues, round characters, illustrative quality, rich language, and an engaging and complex plot. An antiracist approach examines how a white-supremacist ideology is "operationalized in the field of early childhood education, as well as in classroom spaces, defining what is 'valuable' knowledge, 'appropriate' behaviors, and teaching practices" (Escayg, 2019, p. 3). Thus, given the significance of children's literature in the early childhood classroom, the tenets for considering quality children's literature must be critically examined, as well as the values and assumptions that undergird text selection and use.

While the use of the term antiracist to describe one's practice is somewhat recent to early childhood educators, the field has used the term "anti-bias education" since the 1990s (Iruka et al., 2020). Derman-Spark and colleagues (2020) recognize anti-bias early childhood education as a commitment to diversity and cultural competence in a world that is inherently unequal. Within this framework, anti-bias education (ABE) is:

based on the understanding that children are individuals with their own personalities and temperaments and with social group identities based on families who birth and raise them and the way society views who they are...ABE developed from the need to identify and prevent, as much as possible, the impacts on children from societal prejudice and bias. (p. 4)

Escayg (2012) critiques ABE as failing to foreground race as the dominant organizing principle in racial inequities in the United States. Escayg examines how ABE's guidelines are positioned within a framework that is informed by developmentally appropriate practice and one that has an inconsistent history that some characterized as marginalizing non-Eurocentric ways of knowing (Greishaber & Cannella, 2001; Yelland, 2005). When this critique is paired with early literacy instruction, an antiracist framework requires an approach to text selection that provokes a critical understanding of race and racism and its relevant impact on the selection of texts in a child's purview.

A Legacy of Racism in Books Written for Children

Storytelling and storybook reading are shared across homes and classrooms, offering a critical human vantage point to encode the lived experience, of oneself, or others (Heath, 1982). As Dyson and Genishi (1994) have long contended, "stories are an important tool for proclaiming ourselves as cultural beings. In narratives, our voice echoes those of others in the sociocultural world - what those others think is worth commenting on and how they judge the effectiveness of told stories" (p. 5). While children's books serve a central role in early childhood literacy development, a critical examination of how self and others are storied in children's books reveals a market that is pervasively middle-class and White (Souto-Manning, 2013; Tschida et al., 2014). Thomas (2016) notes that "over 85% of all children's and young adult books published feature White characters—a statistic that has barely moved since the 1960s" (p. 116). Children's books are a cultural tool that, when critically examined, reveal the ideology of those who publish the books and contexts in which they had intended use.

While books published for children in the United States first appeared in the early 18th century, mass publication did not begin until the mid-20th century (Stevenson, 2011). With efforts to compete with the Soviet Union in the space race, publishers developed a heightened interest in books intended for children's education and amusement (Pinkerton, 2016). Up until this point, children's books only portrayed the stories of White children or, if BIPOC were represented, it wasn't as humans but instead it was "as inferior in some way—comical, primitive, pitiable, or in need of paternalistic care" (Bishop, 2011, p. 225). This double legacy of both absence and distorted representation persists in the books that are published today. Thomas (2016) notes that "over 85% of all children's and young adult books published feature White characters—a statistic that has barely moved since the 1960s" (p. 116). Thus, children's literature is an artifact of the American experience and White supremacy. And, as Kendi (2019) notes, "Whiteness—even as a construction and a mirage—has informed [White people's] notions of America and identity and offered them privilege, the primary one being the privilege of being inherently normal, standard and legal" (p. 38).

Books for young children harbor racism, albeit in different forms but, "it is about how racist ideologies persist in the literature of childhood, frequently in ways that we fail to notice on a conscious level" (Nel, 2017, p. 4). Books written for young children are often shrouded in nostalgic language and principally subjective in the matter of whose stories are told. Anti-blackness, for example, can be seen in the omission of Blacks, misrepresentation or dehumanizing characterization of Blacks, or the perpetuation of myths or stereotypes about the Black community (Bishop, 2011; Mo & Shen, 2003; Pescosolido et al., 1997). Hughes-Hassell and Cox (2010) state:

Children of color absorb many of the beliefs and values of the dominant White culture, including the belief that it is better to be White. Stereotypes, omissions, and distortions, combined with an image of White superiority, play a role in socializing children of color to value the role models, lifestyles, and images of the beauty of White culture over those of their own cultural group. Countering the story of White superiority is critical to the positive growth and development of self-esteem and self-concept in children of color. (p. 214-215)

Reading aloud literature to children is often characterized as the ideal context for emergent, foundational literacy development (Heath, 1982; Strickland & Morrow, 1998). NAEYC et al. (2021) cite reading aloud to children as the skill most essential for building the understandings and skills essential for later reading success. And yet, despite the star-status children's books receive in early education, the

lack of representation of BIPOC in books targeted at young children remains staggering. Board books, with their wide thick pages, format, and predictability, are designed with the youngest readers in mind (children birth-age 3). And yet, as Hughes-Hassell and Cox (2010) research inventory of these books reveals, “board books that feature people of color are rare and often present inauthentic and monolithic representations. Even rarer seems to be the creation of board books by authors and illustrators of color” (p. 211). Thus, the omission of both representation and authorship yields what Nel describes as “how race is present especially when it is absent” (p. 4).

Antiracist Literacy Teaching and Learning

All too often, race is not discussed in early childhood contexts for fear that children are too young or innocent to grapple with such a complex topic (Tatum, 1992). Indeed, a common myth perpetuates that the minds of young children are either blank slates when it comes to race, incapable of racist actions, or only exposed to racism when it is learned in the home (Winkler, 2009). And yet, studies reveal that children develop an acute understanding of racial differences at an early age (i.e., Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011; Tatum, 1992). What starts in infancy as a cognitive awareness of racial variation, evolves into curiosity and deep awareness, of racial differences in their daily lives and their actions, reactions, questions, and interactions with children and caretakers (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011). Simply put, when it comes to talking to children about race, no time is too early.

Growing up in a Black family and now as the mother of two young Black girls, I can affirm that our racial identity is simply in the oxygen of our home. Tatum (1992) describes how racial identity is developed in Black children at a very young age, whether the child is one of the only Black members of a community or in highly diverse or predominantly Black environments where the topic might include variation in skin tone, for example. An antiracist perspective on early childhood, however, situates race within a context where racism moves beyond one individual, racist act, or belief. Rather, racism is underscored by systemic power, as Oluo (2019) notes “you don’t have to be racist to be a part of a racist system” (p. 28).

Oluo (2019) describes White supremacy as “insidious by design” and “woven into every area of our lives” (p. 218). In children’s literature, this includes and is not limited to, the racist history of books for children (Stevenson, 2011), the publishing industry that selects which authors are published or rejected (Corrie, 2018), and the narrow representation

of young children or childhood in books. Data on books by and about BIPOC published for children and teens compiled by the Cooperative Children's Book Center highlight gradual, but slow progress, in the publishing industry as White main characters, or even animals, continue to dominate the main character roles. With close to 90 percent of children's books featuring a White protagonist, a child's exposure to books comes in tandem with the visual message that Whiteness is the norm. As Welch (2016) aptly argues, one can go out of their way to purchase books that feature BIPOC, however, it is the scarcity of these titles and the publishing mechanisms that maintain this inequity that continues to perpetuate the long-term harm.

Educators and families must grapple with the formidable ways in which White privilege also plays out, both in the content of children's literature and the curricular modalities that are used to teach these texts. That is, educators and White families must consider how White children bear witness to tangible and societal inequity and develop in-group bias, or favoritism towards the groups in which they are members (Patterson & Bigler, 2006). Children's books provide whimsical and imaginative spaces, stories of families, hope, and wonder (Thomas, 2016). Thus, when White children see themselves reflected in these stories as the protagonist, the astronomer, or the princess, these cultural artifacts reinforce their understandings of self within a societal system of power. Additionally, when BIPOC characters are portrayed as secondary, reinforcing anti-Black ideologies, or absent in the text altogether, children's texts reinforce detrimental patterns that reproduce systemic inequalities. Taken together, educators and families require a deeper awareness of antiracist text selection in early childhood classrooms, moving beyond simply a celebration of diversity to one that better captures children's lived experience with race.

Research Methodology

This study enacted an action research case study methodology (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). The study took place over the course of an academic school year (2020-2021) and asked the following research question: What is the relationship between the use of diverse children's literature and a teacher's development as a social justice educator?

This article draws upon the findings presented during a focus group comprised of preliminary and clear-credentialed California teachers. This phase of the research involved a Critical Children's Literature Group (CCLG) that met regularly to discuss select antiracist early childhood texts and served as a broader network for socially just

literacy education. The decision to characterize the group as an inquiry group built on the tradition of Nieto (2003) and Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2015) that puts inquiry and research at the center of teacher's work. During that year, the group of eight teachers met approximately once a month for a 1.5-hour CCLG session. The CCLG meetings were designed to be an informal, semi-structured space to support enhanced pedagogical knowledge. Before each meeting, participants received a comprehensive collection of inclusive children's literature books (i.e., Appendix 1). In between meetings, all participants were asked to maintain a written or audio memo to record their reactions to the text. Based on the work of Escamilla and Nathenson-Mejía (2003) they were asked the following questions every meeting: (1) What has this book led you to think about? (2) What questions does this book raise? and (3) How do you think your students would respond to this book?

All of the teachers worked in California schools (6 public and 2 parochial), self-identified as educators committed to social justice and equity, and were graduates from the same teacher preparation program. Except for one BIPOC male-identifying participant, all others were female-identifying women. Of the six women, one identified as multiracial (both White and Asian American). The five other women self-identified as White. Six of the eight teachers taught in early childhood grades (K-3), however, all texts selected were picture books appropriate for the early childhood spectrum (birth-age 8). It is critical to note that the teachers volunteered to participate in the group and brought knowledge, deep conviction, and interest in critical pedagogies in education. To analyze these data, I subscribed to methods akin to those put forth by Dyson and Genishi (2005), and Marshall and Rossman (2015) to inductively analyze these data. Building on these foundational qualitative methods, I used Phillips and Carr's (2014) three-part cycle for ongoing data analysis. In this model, "each data collection period builds on the one before, incorporates changes and adjustments as you analyze and interpret your ongoing work" (p. 122).

The Critical Children's Literature Group Procedures

Scheduled to begin in the Spring of 2020, the CCLG, like so many other aspects of society, was shifted to a virtual format due to the COVID-19 global pandemic. In addition, the *double pandemic*—COVID-19 and systemic violence and inequities for BIPOC in the U.S.—deeply impacted the lived experiences of the teachers and thus served as the backdrop for all conversations in the CCLG. For example, current events such as Floyd's murder and the subsequent protests or local hate

crimes that targeted Asian American Pacific Island (AAPI) individuals would come up frequently in our conversations about literature.

Each meeting began with a short period of time for participants to greet each other and update their profile name to include the grade they teach. Before the meeting, the teachers were sent a bundle of 5-6 children's books for inclusion in their classroom's library collection. The books and each session were loosely organized around Howlett and Young's (2019) categories of multicultural literature:

- Books that provide a diversity of perspectives
- Books that develop cultural competence
- Books that increase intercultural competence
- Books that combat racism, prejudice, and discrimination
- Books that develop the awareness of the state of a community, country, globe, or planet
- Books that develop social action skills

Appendix 1 presents sample children's books for each of these six categories. While not described in this article, texts were identified within preservice classes and in consultation with a graduate student researcher. We surveyed a broad range of sources to identify current titles in children's literature. Howlett and Young's categories of multicultural literature provided a tool to choose texts in a manner that moved beyond a visual diversity (i.e., a character happened to be BIPOC) to instead one that intentionally offered a lens or method to engage in explicit conversations about diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging. We selected texts by consulting with a local children's bookstore and referencing websites like *We Need Diverse Books* (2022), Bank Street College of Education's (2022) annual list of best books, author and trade book events through the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), and traditional award category nominees (i.e., Coretta Scott King Award, Ezra Jack Keats Award). Given the state of the world at that time, we also noticed a flurry of discussions on diverse children's literature on social media and monitored them as well for additional titles. On some occasions, the CCLG members brought new titles to the group as well. Ultimately, it was not within the scope of this project to create an exhaustive list of books, but instead, its value and purpose was with the intentionality used to select texts and bring them to the CCLG for use and discussion. In sum, over 150 children's books were read and considered over the course of this research and the breadth of titles accounted for rich and complex conversations that ultimately led to the select list of antiracist children's literature presented here.

Each session began with an open-ended short discussion question to orient the conversation. Once the meeting was underway, the conversations were organized around three intentionally broad and open-ended questions: (1) What CCLG books did you read this month? (2) What questions or thoughts did these texts raise? and (3) How did the children respond to these texts? Rarely did the meetings end on time as the teachers were eager to talk to the group about the books, how they generated discussions in their classrooms, or their identity as social justice educators.

Findings

In this section, the findings of this action research study are presented, specifically themes that emerged to answer the following research question: What is the relationship between the use of diverse children's literature and a teacher's development as a social justice educator? These themes highlighted aspects of the work of social justice educators, such as the need to have ongoing and difficult conversations about race and identity, explore and identify antiracist texts collectively, and the opportunity to consider how their students grappled with these texts.

“We Need to Practice this Skill Intentionally and Frequently”

The teachers' participation in the CCLG was voluntary and most described the opportunity to deepen their understanding of what it means to be an antiracist teacher. For example, one teacher later reflected:

Racial literacy and social comprehension skills are a core foundation for me as a teacher. Every book that is read to children or read in a classroom creates an opportunity to have a conversation with students about race, social justice, and the numerous pieces a part of it. To create a more equitable and just society, individuals need to be made aware of, given tools and skills and be put in opportunities to practice identifying, discussing, and questioning race and the numerous layers that go along with it like systems, power, privilege, microaggressions, and bias.

Several teachers commented on the importance of talking about issues of race and equity with children and felt that an audience of young children was easier to talk to than that of adults. As one teacher noted, first graders can be more open than their family members. Another commented on the difference between a discussion with children and that with adults:

With adults, I'm still working on that part. I feel more comfortable talking about it with kids. And, if they're not, then that's what I'm here for. But most of the time, it's a lot of pushback in groups like—this shouldn't be talked about at school. Then where should it be talked about when they spend about six, seven hours a day with me?...Race is 100% a part of everyone's life, whether you're White or whether you're not. If you're White, it's 100% a part of your life, because, look at all that privilege you've got; for sure, it's part of your life.

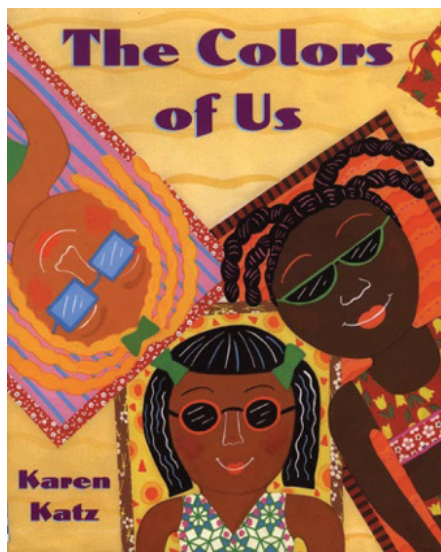
In addition, some of the teachers avoided conversations about race with other adults as they feared “saying the wrong thing” or being misunderstood. One first-grade teacher noted her worries about reading books that explicitly discussed race, in front of her classroom aid (a Black woman). However, most agreed that children were the safest of audiences to develop these skills and that their anxieties could not drive their choices if they wanted to embody an antiracist approach to teaching and learning. Thus, talking to children intentionally and explicitly about race supported the teachers in their ability to have these conversations more frequently and more often. As one second-grade teacher stated:

Just like how it is a priority that my students learn how to add and subtract multi-digit numbers this year. If I'm dedicating two class meetings a week to that math skill, I need to dedicate just as much (if not more) time to talk with my kids about race and equity. The more that we get our students talking, the more comfortable they will feel in discussing these important topics and they will be more equipped to express their feelings and thoughts about race and identity. We need to practice that skill intentionally and frequently, like any other skill.

Early in the CCLG, we took note of “predictable conversations” that might occur when teachers are reading antiracist children's books. We challenged ourselves to move beyond “this student said” or “this parent feels” rhetoric, to one where we highlighted patterns when teachers engage in this type of work. For example, one teacher shared how his reading of *The Color of Us* (Katz, 2002) (see Figure 1) resulted in a White child saying she felt “left out of the pictures.” As a BIPOC, the teacher (Cameron) felt caught off-guard by the statement.

Several of the CCLG White teachers used this moment to pivot from the actual interaction and instead reframed the challenge to one that situated the event within an antiracist framework. While we always talked through our experiences, we also pivoted to the broader themes and challenges that present when one is engaging in this type of teaching. One teacher, affirming the BIPOC teacher's feelings of uncertainty in reading the text offered an alternative argument and

Figure 1



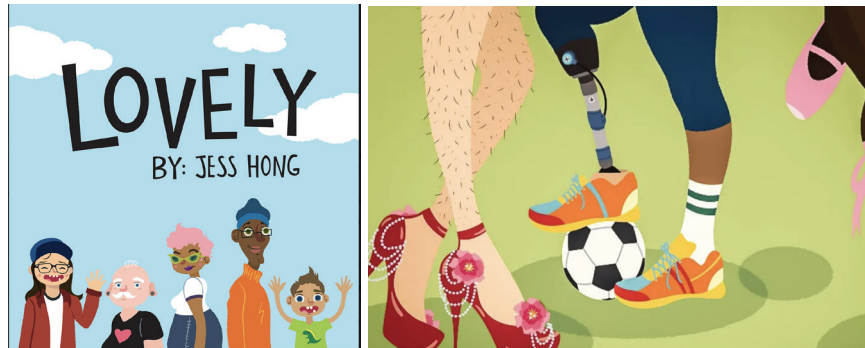
stated, “I’m White, I see so much White stuff all around me...all around heteronormative White stuff all over the place.” From there, she raised the reoccurring theme of the importance of text representation in classroom libraries, curriculum, and school programming. In addition, she encouraged Cameron to engage this child and the class of students in an analysis of the classroom texts that present this pattern.

Lingering Over a Page

Each month, the teachers were provided with a bundle of books to be included in their classroom library. In all cases, the teachers took the opportunity to read the books independently and read all or some of them with their students. While many of the children’s books explicitly highlighted issues of race or class, some stood out to the teachers in the way that they just offered the “everyday” diversity of the world around us.

The teachers were drawn to the opportunities presented by the book *Lovely* (Hong, 2017) (see Figure 2). In her first book as a children’s author, through vivid and unexpected imagery, Hong showcases that “Big, small, curly, straight, loud, quiet, smooth, wrinkly. *Lovely* explores a world of differences that all add up to the same thing: we are all lovely!” (Creston Books, n.p.).

Sally, a first-grade teacher described her experience bringing

Figure 2

Lovely into her first-grade classroom. With her CCLG book set, Sally would first put the books out on display. She observed how her first graders engaged in collective meaning-making activities born from their curiosities, questions, and interests when previewing the texts with each other.

I have not read *Lovely* to my entire class, but I had it out on my display bookshelf in my room. And because there are not a lot of words, and a lot of illustrations, two girls got to pick a book, and they chose that one. They didn't read any of the words because they can't read yet. That's okay. They were looking at the pictures. And they stopped at a page and they started talking about it...and they had this entire conversation by themselves about a page in a book without even knowing what the book was about. Never having a teacher read it to them. But just being able to have a conversation about similarities and differences, just from a picture in a book it was really cool to see them do that.

Another teacher described how powerful it was for her students to see a tattooed image in a picture book. While tattoos and body art are common amongst the adults in her school community, rarely do they see tattooed people on the pages of children's books. The teacher noted that one student commented, "that looks like my dad's arm!" As a result, the teacher embraced the opportunity to linger on the page and discuss the illustrations with her students. One teacher noted:

I really appreciate *Lovely*. We often see diversity in terms of culture, skin color, traditions, but I really like how *Lovely* included body positivity and people with disabilities because sometimes we forget to include that in what we decide is diverse. Things like that, and allowing the kids to ask questions like, why does that person look like that? Why does their skin look like that? Or why are they using that

device, or even just like, I'm someone who's struggled with my weight, so to see, like, lovely as being a little bit bigger, and that's okay, too. I love that that is being spoken and read to the kids, for them to start having that mindset of that is okay, that is lovely.

Sally's students who "discovered" *Lovely* highlighted a valuable early reading behavior that we coined lingering over a page. When discussing the texts, the teachers commented on pages that students "lingered over" and were eager to discuss and process in the community. In turn, the teachers modeled this practice in the CCLG. In the text, *All Are Welcome Here* (Penfold, 2018), the author unapologetically affirms diversity through a colorful and engaging portrayal of a diverse and inclusive school setting. The center spread (see Figure 3), a family event in the school's gym, was one of those pages that frequently reoccurred, both in our conversations in the CCLG and the teachers' classrooms.

One teacher, Ava, describes how her classroom often lingered on this page. She stated:

It is a space for kids to be okay to just be curious about some of the things that they notice about individuals on the page. For example, 'I see someone wearing something wrapped around their head,' that type of thing. Then it kind of opens [the conversation] up, that way it is not negative but more an inquiry...Then we can go back to it, [and say] 'well, ok, you perceive this person was this way because you saw them wearing this...' So, it is a good book to come back to later on.

The World is On Fire around Us

Over the year with the CCLG, despite our inability to meet in person, we collectively grieved and supported each other through the painful events that occurred in the world around us, just as we sat on our computer screens. The CCLG commenced just after the violent and

Figure 3



public murder of George Floyd and the teachers returned to classrooms in communities that were often draped with Black Lives Matter posters, murals, and protests. In addition, over the year, several visible and deeply harmful images and videos were shared publicly of hate crimes against the AAPI community. And so, the CCGI shifted into a critical space for the teachers to process how they were engaging with children, in these conversations, in real-time.

Several teachers commented on how Black History Month 2021 brought out several conversations about George Floyd. Ashley, a second-grade teacher, described a conversation that occurred that month on her classroom rug. The students had recently attended an assembly and the conversation turned to George Floyd. Ashley chose to read the CCLG text, *The Breaking News* (Reul, 2018). In this text, children feel the aftermath of a community that is distracted and troubled by recent news and it offers the perspective of children, who are bystanders in these moments in time. Ashley noted:

After George Floyd, my students really connected with [*The Breaking News*]...they were able to share, that they went to our schools' Black Lives Matters march, after that or made signs. They shared some tangible things that they had done to take action or to express their experiences after George Floyd's murder.

The CCLG group had spent significant time that year discussing unexpected turns conversations with children could take and Ashley's class soon entered one of those moments. She described how some of the children began to talk about how George Floyd was in the news again because the police officer's trial for murder had begun. Ashley recalled:

...one of my students said, 'Well, why did that police officer kill him? Like, what did he do?' And another student of mine raised his hand and he said, 'Oh, well, he didn't have a reason except for that he's racist.' And then another kid was like, 'You're not supposed to say that. And I was like, 'Why? Why are you not supposed to say that? Are you feeling worried that you're not supposed to call people racist?'

Ashley commented on how empowered she felt, at this moment, to have this conversation because she had also received the CCLG book *A Kid's Book About Racism* (Memory, 2019). Ashley described how she shared this text with her students, a text with no pictures, just words set against a crisp white backdrop that invites children to speak plainly and matter-of-fact manner about racism (see Figure 4).

She stated:

And so, this is a perfect moment to read *A Kid's Book About Racism*. I

Figure 4

told them [the second graders], we don't usually do back to back read alouds but I think we are really ready for this book right now. So we kind of shared what they understood for it to be...In *The Breaking News*, you really pay attention to the images of the people and the colors; it is all gray and the little pockets of light. With this book, it's all focusing on the words. They were just so—in trance—listening and absorbing what it was saying. ...it was just really such a unique reading, with them being able to go from one book to another... we spent, at least an hour, the first hour of school day, just talking about all of it and reading those two books. And it was really, it was a wonderful experience. And I think they all took something from it feeling like, more confident and recognizing racism when it happens... And so it was just a valuable experience. And I felt lucky to have those two books on hand and feel prepared to deliver them both.

Ashley worked in a progressive school district that supported the faculty in their efforts to engage in antiracist pedagogy. In that sense, the work was not new to the community, though Ashley's commitment and dedication indeed positioned her as a leader in their community. Through the CCLG the teachers also supported each other in school environments that were less open to the work of social justice educators.

“The World Does Not Look Like Our School”

Melanie, a resource teacher in a suburban public school was a valued member of the CCLG. In her fifth year of teaching, Melanie often expressed her appreciation of her school's new principal, who

was working to transform their school from one where a “color-blind” ideology was pervasive among some teachers and parents, to one that embraced diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging. In one of her first professional development events, Melanie recounted her new principal telling the faculty that, “the world does not look like our school” and therefore, it is the responsibility of the teachers, to bring that world into their classrooms.

With the support of her new principal, Melanie embraced the opportunity to understand how a social justice framework applied to her work as a special education resource teacher. Melanie described how her work, particularly in early literacy, is often reduced to a discrete set of skills, academic learning goals, or responsibilities separate from young children. Her students can also be characterized, by some, through a deficit lens or incapable of more complex conversations. And so, when Melanie’s third-grade students discussed the picture book, *Hidden Figures* (Shetterly, 2018) it was impactful, not just on the students, but also for the general classroom teacher who witnessed the event and subsequent conversation.

With the new principal *Hidden Figures* had been a school-wide read aloud. It had been read in a third-grade classroom where I co-taught during some of the readers and writers workshop times [with the resource room students]. I had a couple of students in that classroom and one of the students has autism, and it can appear like he is not paying attention. But then we’ll have these moments where it’s very clear, he is paying attention, it just doesn’t look like listening looks for most kids. So as we were reading the book, the student raises his hand in the middle of the book and was like, isn’t that segregation? For me, it was a special moment, for many reasons. But one was, it came from a student who, if you walked in the room and set eyes on him, people wouldn’t be able to tell he was listening. But he really was listening, was super intrigued by the book...and, he sparked this conversation in the class...and so, that book has held a special place in my heart in the way it sparked conversation for the class and that unique way.

Melanie’s reading highlighted the concern that the teachers raised that some parents or community members felt that conversations about race and equity were not appropriate for young children. As the teachers felt more comfortable reading the books, discussing the books, lingering over pages, and rehearsing the difficult conversations that might arise, they felt validation and pride to include these books in their libraries and curriculum. Ava noted how she now works to replace the “traditional” texts in her reading and writing workshops with ones that account for the diversity of the world around them. One

teacher did caution that she felt comfortable reading the books but felt uncertain how to continue the conversations with some members of her school community. At this point, one participant reminded her that the work we do functions on a continuum and so this was just another indication of that and her journey as a social justice educator.

Discussion

The findings of this action research study highlight how teachers of young children can actively engage in antiracist pedagogy. Whether their students were sitting in the presence of books that affirmed their identities or engaging in critical conversations about racism or Black joy, the CCLG teachers understood that their work as educators required persistent and embedded work that disrupted systemic inequities present in the lives of children. Through participation in the CCLG and the opportunity to analyze children's books, teachers were provided a space to examine their identities as educators committed to social justice. This study, therefore, adds to the scholarship on teacher development and the value and importance of teacher professional development that supports antiracist pedagogy in early childhood classrooms.

The findings of this study also demonstrate the need for professional spaces where teachers can speak candidly about race and racism to disrupt patterns of systemic oppression in schools. White and Wanless (2019) write that "because Black people have historically been assigned the lowest status in the American racial hierarchy, U.S. racism causes undue harm to Black children in particular" (p. 73). Early childhood educators require spaces to talk through societal harm caused by racism and identify tangible resources that can support facilitating productive and meaningful, developmentally attuned, conversations with young children.

As was mentioned, this study occurred at a time when the United States faced the COVID-19 global pandemic and systemic violence and inequities for BIPOC. Indeed, the findings demonstrate how these topics were prevalent in both the CCLG meetings and the classroom experiences for the teachers and children. Husband (2018) highlights the necessity of antiracist early education as "teachers should teach children about race and racial justice [to] develop a sensitivity to racial injustices in their everyday lives and within the broader society" (p. 1067). Thus, the presence of antiracist literature became a critical tool for early educators to use to assist in their discussions of the everyday world with young children.

Implications of this study also examine how young White children and families are impacted by the misrepresentation and omission of BIPOC in children's literature. Setting Whiteness as the default in children's literature underscores what some qualify as "White supremacy" in education, that is "Whiteness is supreme over others. We see that present in our values as a nation, in our culture, in our ways of being, and, therefore, embedded in all our systems" (Brown, 2021, p. 29). Here, the findings from the CCLG highlight teachers from a broad range of classroom settings—urban/suburban public and parochial—who saw that value in using an inclusive and nuanced classroom book selection that centered diversity, equity, justice, and belonging. As Appendix 1 demonstrates, using a critical lens, teachers can be intentional in the selection of literature and consider race and equity in the selection of texts for the classroom. Thus, the findings from this work underscore Escayg's (2019) synthesis supports antiracist teaching as it has the capacity for teachers to gain "additional insights on how children draw on cultural messages, representations, and ideas about race to construct their own racial understandings" (2019, p. 2).

Text selection alone does not mitigate or curb the impact of systemic racism in early childhood classrooms. Gaias et al. (2021), for example, considered the intentional focus on race, culture, and across domains of practice to include: Visual/Esthetic Environment, Toys and Materials, Activities, Interactions, and Organizational Climate. While this research only considered one aspect—classroom literature—it does shed light on how teachers can be actively engaged in a teaching practice that serves to disrupt White supremacy culture and bring meaningful and relevant content into the lives of all the children in their classrooms. In that sense, these practices reflect the ethos of a culturally sustaining pedagogy in early childhood that Paris (2012) defines as one that can "perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling" (p. 93).

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Appendix I

Select Children's Books based on Howlett and Young's (2019) Categories of Multicultural Literature

Category	CCLG Select Children's Books
Books that Provide a Diversity of Perspectives	<i>All Are Welcome Here</i> (Penfold, 2018) <i>Lovely</i> (Hong, 2017) <i>Colors of Us</i> (Katz, 2002)
Books that Develop Cultural Consciousness	<i>Night Job</i> (Hesse, 2018) <i>Dreamers</i> (Morales, 2018) <i>Bedtime Bonnet</i> (Redd, 2022)
Books that Increase Intercultural Competence	<i>Saturday</i> (Mora, 2019) <i>Drawn Together by</i> (Lê, 2018) <i>The Proudest Blue</i> (Muhammad, 2019)
Books that combat Racism, Prejudice, and Discrimination	<i>A Kid's Book About Racism</i> (Memory, 2019) <i>Breaking News</i> (Reul, 2018) <i>Don't Touch My Hair</i> (Miller, 2019)
Books that Develop the Awareness of the State of a Community, Country, Globe, or Planet	<i>Hidden Figures</i> (Shetterly & Freeman, 2018) <i>Separate Is Never Equal: Sylvia Mendez and Her Family's Fight for Desegregation</i> (Tonatiuh, 2014) <i>We Are Water Protectors</i> (Lindstrom, 2020)
Books that Develop Social Action Skills (through history or present day events)	<i>Let the Children March</i> (Clark-Robinson, 2018) <i>Just Ask</i> (Sotomayor, 2019) <i>Shaking Things Up: 14 Young Women who Changed the World</i> (Hood, 2022)