

Racial Literacy: A Productive Framework for Engaging Race and Racism in Teacher Education

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Abstract

This study explores the framework of racial literacy. The term “racial literacy” has been used with increasing frequency in recent years; however, there are varied ways that the term is conceptualized and utilized. In some educational research studies, the term is only briefly defined and/or conceived of as something to achieve once and for all. Our study fleshes out the theory, drawing on foundational scholarship of racial literacy, empirical studies using racial literacy in teacher education, and the field of English/Language Arts to explore the nuances of ‘literacy’ as they relate to the framework and insights from our research project on teacher candidates’ racial literacy. We define racial literacy in our context and illustrate it with data from a two-part research project that examined (1) student response to racial literacy teacher preparation curriculum and (2) self-reflection and peer feedback in developing and teaching antiracist pedagogy. It is vital for teacher educators to remind themselves that race work is a process, one that can be messy and uncertain. We argue that the racial literacy framework is productive for teacher educators working with teacher candidates due to its developmental, ongoing, non-linear nature.

Keywords: *racial literacy, teacher education, antiracist teaching, teacher candidates*

Sparked by the murder of George Floyd in the summer of 2020, protestors took to the streets throughout the United States (U.S.) to speak out against racism and violence in the police force (Hill, 2020). This wave of Black Lives Matter protests and activism amplified awareness of the presence and harms of racism to a broader range of the population across the United States (Hill, 2020; Taylor, 2020). Protests brought attention to the pernicious impact of racism across multiple systems, including education. Young people organized in public and on social media with calls to remove police officers from schools, reform curriculum to teach all students our racialized history, and enact policies that address inequity in educational opportunity for racially minoritized groups. Yet, awareness of racism in education is not new, and many scholars (Banks, 2001; Chapman, 2011; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Milner & Laughter, 2015; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001) have identified critical understanding of race, racism and anti-racism as key to enabling teachers to work for justice.

The current context highlights the urgency of adopting frameworks across teacher education that prepare teachers to understand and address the impact of race and racism in education. There is a clear need for antiracist teaching, which involves both an “orientation towards teaching aimed at deepening understandings of how racial subjugation functions in schooling” (Ohito, 2019, p. 2), and action towards addressing racism in ways that create a more democratic society (Blakeney, 2005). One such framework is racial literacy. Racial literacy was first conceptualized by legal scholar Guinier (2003) as a diagnostic and analytic tool that involves “the ability to read

race in conjunction with institutional and democratic structures” (p. 120) and that defines racism as a “structural problem rather than a purely individual one” (p. 202). In this article, we describe our experiences as we integrated a racial literacy approach into our work with teacher candidates. We form a research team of teacher educators that includes two white women (Jill and Lynn) and one Puerto Rican woman (Rosalie) concerned with issues related to race, racism and educational equity. We seek to develop teacher candidates who are proficient in our content areas, but also understand race and are agents of change regarding systemic racism in the education system—in other words, we seek to prepare teacher candidates to become racially literate.

For four years, we explored our engagement with racial literacy through a two-part research project examining (1) student response to racial literacy teacher preparation curriculum and (2) self-reflection and peer feedback in developing and teaching pedagogy focused on racial justice. Both phases of our project helped us better articulate how we conceptualize a racial literacy framework for teacher education. The purpose of this article is first to describe how existing scholarship informed our conceptualization of a racial literacy framework for teacher education, then to further illustrate key features of that framework with insights from our research project. Ultimately, we seek to show that the racial literacy framework is productive for teacher educators working with teacher candidates due to its developmental, ongoing, non-linear nature.

Foundational Scholarship on Racial Literacy

Recently, the term “racial literacy” has been used with increasing frequency; a search of 10 general and social science-focused databases for the keywords “racial literacy” in the last 10 years yielded 311 results: 61 books, 174 articles, and 64 chapters. Cited scholars usually emphasized different, but complimentary dimensions of racial literacy. For example, Guinier (2003, 2004) links the concept to Critical Race Theory (CRT) and advocates for understanding structural elements of race when developing racial literacy. Thus, at the core of racial literacy are CRT conceptualizations of race, not as a biologically determined fact but as a social construct invented and manipulated by society to classify and rank individuals according to changing criteria of what constitutes a racial group (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Racism involves the white supremacist ideological system that sustains this racial hierarchy and justifies the structural organization of societal institutions in ways that confer the most power and benefits to white people at the expense, exclusion, and harm of racially minoritized groups (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Pérez Huber & Solórzano, 2015). CRT describes racism as deeply ingrained in institutions and daily life, to the point of invisibility for the dominant white group (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Guinier (2004) notes that developing racial literacy involves engaging in a continual learning process about the ways race, “in conjunction with class and geography[,] invariably shapes educational, economic and political opportunities for all of us” (p. 117). Guinier (2004) acknowledges the negative psychological effects that racism produces, but also highlights the ways racism impacts institutional power dynamics and access to resources. Further, Guinier (2004) explores how structural racism reinforces the divergence of interests among and between groups. According to Guinier (2004), racial literacy is context-specific, requiring understandings and solutions responsive to the unique racial dynamics of particular situations and institutions. Guinier’s (2004) work provides essential foundations of the racial literacy framework, describing it as a non-linear learning process: dilemmas related to race require us to continually re-read, re-learn, and re-teach in ways attentive to context.

In their conceptions, Twine (2004) and Stevenson (2014) focus on the psychological and emotional components of racial literacy. Twine (2004), a frequently cited scholar, uses whiteness studies as a foundation to demonstrate how parents in transracial families socialize their children to understand race and racism. Twine (2004) defines racial literacy as an antiracist teaching and socialization project in which parents utilize resources, conceptual tools, and discursive practices to promote healthy racial identity development in their children and to teach them how to resist racism. Stevenson's (2014) definition of racial literacy as "the ability to read, recast and resolve racial stress in social encounters" (p. 16) provides a needed emphasis on the emotionality of racial work. Stevenson (2014) argues that individuals must understand how they were socialized to understand race. Stevenson (2014) also advocates for attention to emotional responses to racially stressful situations. Like Twine (2004), Stevenson (2014) focuses attention on developing healthy racial identities and on teaching individuals the skills to identify and competently resolve racial encounters. The three aforementioned researchers provided the foundational pillars for our conception of racial literacy. These pillars include (a) recognizing racial literacy as an ongoing, context-specific learning process that includes gaining conceptual understandings of the social, hierarchical nature of race, (b) understanding racism as a normalized process with deep impact on our societal structure, (c) being aware of how race and racism shape institutions such as education, (d) learning about how race impacts individuals' socialization, (e) developing skills to resolve racially stressful encounters, and (f) integrating antiracist practices into our roles as educators.

Racial Literacy in Education

Conceptualizations of racial literacy outlined by scholars in education also informed the framework for our project. Some literature using the concept of racial literacy focused on competencies that students can develop, including scholars who make specific connections to literacy practices with elementary students. For example, in their study of a second-grade classroom, Rogers and Mosley (2006) point out, "within social struggles for freedom and justice, literacy has always been deeply enmeshed in race" (p. 462). Their study highlighted the importance of contextualizing and recognizing racial "subtexts" in the public discourse. For these authors, racial literacy provides a means for "guid[ing] participatory problem solving" (p. 465). Their study ties understanding of these issues to literacy instruction as it is traditionally seen, in terms of reading and writing. Similarly, Kaczmarczyk et al. (2018) advocate for combating "racial illiteracy" in elementary students through literacy teaching, such as reading picture books, conducting literature circles, and writing dialogue journals, noting that "[c]oupling literacy instruction with books that evoke thoughts and feelings about race and social justice can aid teachers in facilitating...much-needed conversations" about "race and social justice" (p. 524).

These researchers provide examples of pedagogical practices that can help teachers guide young students to read and respond to texts in order to develop racial literacy, leading to connections to the field of English Language Arts. The National Council of Teachers of English's (NCTE) Commission on Reading defined literacy, specifically reading, in a way that supports this emphasis on "texts" in racial literacy: "a complex, purposeful, social, and cognitive process in which readers simultaneously use their knowledge of spoken and written language, their knowledge of the topic of the text, and their knowledge of their culture to construct meaning" (Commission on Reading, n.d., p. 1). These concepts apply to our framework of racial literacy because this work requires bringing together multiple texts and contexts in order to develop understandings. Literacy shows how teacher candidates read, write, listen, and speak in response to various "texts": in the case of racial literacy, to develop their understanding and willingness to engage in race work.

Applying racial literacy to the teacher education context, Epstein and Gist (2015) center three aspects of Guinier's (2004) framework. One aspect is the ability to understand the racial grammar of our society's racial hierarchies. The second is the effect of race on psychological states and interpersonal relations, and the third is the need to address race and racism directly in education (Epstein & Gist, 2015). Both Epstein and Gist (2015) and Horsford (2014) show how teacher candidates need to develop skills and vocabulary to understand race and discuss race as a social construction. Epstein and Gist (2015) also note the frequent necessity of helping teacher candidates clarify misunderstandings about race and its social impact. Horsford (2014) further suggests that candidates must be able to read the structural dimensions of race present in our country's history and in contemporary social conditions. Epstein and Gist (2015) and Horsford (2014) influenced our work in their application of racial literacy competencies to teacher education, particularly in terms of providing opportunities for teacher candidates to develop skills and vocabulary to engage in race work and to clarify misunderstandings about what race and racism are and how they impact education.

Studies by other noted scholars (Skerrett, 2011; Sealey-Ruiz, 2011; Sealey-Ruiz & Greene, 2015) also impacted our conceptualization and use of racial literacy. Skerrett's (2011) research examined the "extent and quality of teachers' racial literacy knowledge and practice" (p. 313). Skerrett (2011) categorized teachers into three categories including (a) apprehensive and authorized, (b) incidental and ill-informed, and (c) sustained and strategic. Skerrett (2011) found that all participants expressed the desire to know more, and to continue to build their racial literacy, therefore concluding with a call to engage school leaders and teachers with racial literacy work to help them develop nuanced and comprehensive understandings about race and education. Though their work centered on practicing teachers, its focus on the ongoing nature of racial literacy was relevant to our research.

Sealey-Ruiz (2011) studied teacher candidates, noting that students who build racial literacy recognize "race as a major factor in inequitable systems present in schools" (p. 118). Sealey-Ruiz and Greene (2015) define racial literacy as "a skill and practice in which individuals are able to discuss the social construction of race, probe the existence of racism and examine the harmful effects of racial stereotypes" (p. 60). Sealey-Ruiz and Greene (2015) also highlight the importance of "opening and sustaining dialog about race and the racist acts we witness in our home and school communities, and society writ-large," with the goal of developing antiracist teachers (p. 60). Sealey-Ruiz (2011) focuses on developing teachers who are advocates for social change through pedagogical practices as well as taking "action against injustice in their school settings once they recognize it" (p. 118). We drew on Sealey-Ruiz's (2011) and Sealey-Ruiz and Greene's (2015) work in considering what racially literate teacher candidates would look like in our context and what engaging in anti-racism work involves.

Researchers like Epstein and Schieble (2019), Colomer (2019), Blaisdell (2018), Solic and Riley (2019), and Pabon and Basile (2019) have used the work cited above as a basis for developing definitions and measuring the extent of enactment of racial literacy practices by teachers or teacher candidates—both racially minoritized and white, depending on the study. These studies all identify valuable targets and understandings. Yet at times, defining racial literacy as competencies to be measured may lead to the assumption that once participants achieve these goals, they never move; the objective has been completely accomplished. We seek to extend this research to account for the unique nature of "literacy" as it is more generally defined.

As we considered the features of literacy more broadly, two English/Language Arts sources were helpful. In a paper commissioned by what is now the Literacy Research Association (formerly the National Reading Conference), Alexander (2005) presents a “developmental” orientation toward literacy, a “lifespan model” (p. 416). While focused specifically on reading, Alexander’s (2005) model applies to literacy more generally in several ways, including racial literacy. Two aspects especially important to racial literacy are the focus on “personal interest” as a “driving force” and development as “a lifelong journey” (p. 413). In a blog post sponsored by NCTE, Condon (2017) also highlights the need for “lifelong learning,” emphasizing the “habits, skill set, and inclination needed” (para. 2). There is an important distinction between teaching *reading and writing* and teaching *to read and to write* with the latter meaning “to fully embrace all of the possibilities of literacy and actually and actively DO personally fulfilling reading and writing” (Condon, 2017, para. 4). Condon (2017) goes on to explain that reading and writing involves asking questions, pursuing answers and then sharing emerging ideas, perspectives and discoveries. This broad conception of literacy as lifelong habits and practices that lead to action strongly connects to our notion of racial literacy, including Guinier’s (2004) notion of race work as a process. Literacy is ongoing; there is not an end point. It encompasses a set of skills that we can attain, but also indicates a stance: a willingness to learn, ask questions, and think critically. All of these are dispositions that can be applied to learning about race. Our framework thus highlights different features of literacy in order to emphasize the ongoing, inquiry nature of racial literacy, building further on Sealey-Ruiz’s (2011) commitment to taking action, which we see as essential to antiracist pedagogy.

Racial Literacy in Our Context

Objectives

In this section, we provide additional details on our racial literacy project: we describe our context, participants, and methods; and we illustrate how key features of the racial literacy framework were evidenced in our work with teacher candidates. The aforementioned racial literacy scholarship, which we engaged with throughout our project, as well as our knowledge of the demographics of our teacher candidates and our years of prior experiences working in our context, helped us identify the following objectives as essential to the development of racial literacy:

- 1) Understanding that racism is a contemporary problem, not just something in the past;
- 2) Understanding that race is socially constructed but has a profound effect on educational experiences and outcomes;
- 3) Recognizing ways that racism is institutionalized in systems such as education;
- 4) Gaining practice in reading, reflecting on, addressing, and working to resolve racially stressful encounters;
- 5) Applying our racial literacy stance and skills to our understanding of our role as educators who must actively address racism.

We invite other researchers and teacher educators to use these skills and dispositions as a potential starting point, recognizing that they may need to address other racial literacy competencies that are responsive to their context, their teacher candidates’ needs, and their teacher candidates’ prior experiences and knowledge of race and racism.

Our Research Process

Context and Goals

Our racial literacy project came about as a result of a 2015 university-wide institute that invited participants to develop ways to “engage difference” in their teaching. The purpose of our project was to study the use of racial literacy in our courses and to study our process. A focus on racial literacy was particularly important to us in the context of our work in our state’s flagship, predominantly white university where the three distinct teacher education programs (elementary teacher education, secondary English education and early childhood education) in which we each work addressed complex understandings of race to varying degrees. In phase one of our project, we developed assignments, materials, and lessons with the goal of fostering racial literacy in teacher candidates in three undergraduate courses and then studied teacher candidates’ responses. The research goals for this phase¹ were to: a) investigate the range of responses from undergraduate teacher candidates to curriculum activities that seek to develop racial literacy and b) describe the ways that our pedagogical interventions shaped undergraduate teacher candidates’ racial literacy. In this article, selected findings from phase one illustrate the conceptual or applied facets of racial literacy that we identified as important for a teacher education racial literacy framework.

In phase two, we turned the research to ourselves, conducting a self-study of our experiences as we taught and learned with each other and our teacher candidates. The research goals² for this phase were a) to investigate the affective components and management of racial stress that must be considered as professors employ pedagogy to promote students’ racial literacy, and b) to explore how collaboration, specifically critical self-study, can support the work and growth of racial justice-oriented professors. Phase two helped us better articulate the pedagogical components of our racial literacy framework particularly as we explored our teaching strategies for addressing race concepts and themes, nurturing antiracist teacher identities, and exploring strategies for managing racialized emotions and racial stress in our work with students.

Methods

Our study design was primarily qualitative in nature but also included a quantitative survey. In phase one of our project, 64 teacher candidates agreed to participate in the study. Mirroring national trends of the emerging teaching force (McDonald, 2007), our programs still struggle to recruit and retain diverse candidates. Therefore, the demographics of our 64 study participants mirror those of our classes as a whole. The majority of study participants were white (93%), middle- to upper-class young women. Just under 7% of the 64 participants identified as racially minoritized; the same percentage (though not necessarily the same students) identified as low income; and approximately 13% indicated that they were first generation college students.

In phase one, we administered a pre- and post-course survey to measure differences in candidates’ beliefs about race and education and readiness to teach about race. The survey was administered online at the beginning (N=60) and end (N=58) of the course and asked candidates to state their opinions or understandings about key concepts on a six-point scale (1 = Disagree

1. Full discussion of phase one is beyond the scope of this paper. We outline details about our pedagogy in Flynn et al., 2018, and we describe research findings related to student responses in Rolón-Dow et al., 2020.

2. Full discussion of phase two is beyond the scope of this paper. For detailed discussion of our self-study, please see Flynn et al., 2020.

Strongly, 6 = Strong Agree)³. Phase one qualitative data included course artifacts, specifically three racial literacy assignments. These assignments included: a racial analysis of participants' own educational experiences; a racial analysis of curriculum materials; and a final project in which candidates applied these ideas to a product, such as developing a unit or a series of lessons, creating a family communication plan, or exploring a racially literate teaching resource. To triangulate our data (Shenton, 2004), we also completed semi-structured interviews with a smaller group of focal participants (see Table 1). To select focal participants, we made a list that included students from all three courses who represented diverse racial backgrounds and who had varied responses to the curriculum. We sent invitations to this list of students and stopped recruiting once we had obtained 20 participants. To minimize socially desirable answers, a graduate student conducted the interviews.

Table 1

Participants

Pseudonym	Program	Race (self-identified)
Alanah	English	White
Briana	Elementary	White
Ciara	English	Biracial (African American & White)
Courtney	Elementary	White
Emily	Early childhood	White
Isabella	Elementary	White
Jackie	Early childhood	White
Jennifer	Early childhood	White

3. In this article, we only report on results on the items relevant to our conceptualization of the racial literacy framework.

Jeremy	English	White and Korean
Jessica	Early childhood	Asian American (adopted into White family)
Julia	Elementary	White
Kira	English	White
Kurt	English	White
Marisa	Early childhood	Hispanic
Moira	English	White
Ruby	English	White
Savannah	Elementary	White
Samuel	English	White
Shannon	Early childhood	Korean (adopted into White family)
Ted	English	White

For phase two, we video recorded each racial literacy lesson (three per instructor). Along with the graduate student who was part of our research team, we met three times, one per professor, to provide feedback after watching video clips that we individually selected. For this portion, we drew on the tuning protocol developed by the National School Reform Faculty (2020). The protocol is a professional development tool used for receiving critical feedback from colleagues leading to fine tuning of pedagogical practices. We wrote reflective memos after teaching and after the video analysis process. Finally, the graduate student interviewed each of us separately, providing our last source of data for phase two.

We engaged in an inductive data analysis process (Hatch, 2002) which included establishment and refinement of codes, coding of all data by two research members, writing of analytic memos in response to reports of coded data, and ongoing team meetings in which we developed assertions about how our emerging data findings related (or not) to our research questions (Saldaña, 2013). One of the challenges that we faced as we engaged a racial analysis—both through the teaching components of this project and in collecting, coding, and interpreting data—was how to treat the development of racial understanding as a fluid, non-linear, dynamic process. There are many studies that document how participants, particularly white teacher candidates, are lacking in their racial literacy and/or commitments to social justice; indeed, in their review of research, Jupp and Lensmire (2016) show how work in the “first wave” of white teacher identity research focuses almost exclusively on documenting white teachers’ and candidates’ shortcomings and resistance to race work (p. 985).

While understanding opposition has its place, we wanted to focus on how to address and overcome teacher candidates’ limited racial understanding and resistance. Particularly from our stance as teacher/researchers, we did not find it helpful to place the study participants in a hierarchy with teacher candidates ranked from high to low on their level of racial understandings. In teaching and in data collection/analysis, therefore, we attempted to identify the understandings about race each teacher candidate brought to the course, to elicit their candid perspectives, and to develop their racial literacy from this starting point.

In the following section, we illustrate how participants demonstrated racial literacy in different ways. Our intent in this piece is not to gauge the degree of effectiveness or examine the overall impact of the pedagogy; rather, it is to illuminate the facets of racial literacy that we identified as productive.

Research Findings: Demonstrating Racial Literacy

Knowing Racism is a Contemporary Issue

Sometimes students, particularly white teacher candidates who do not have to directly confront racism in their daily lives, believe that racial prejudice happened primarily in the past or has minimal impact today. Looking back, several participants recognized this trend in their own schooling. Shannon wrote in one of her assignments that “race wasn’t really a thought when I was a kid in school growing up.” In her racial identity paper, Briana noted that in her elementary school education, “I found the majority of topics of conversation to be based around white people and their impact ... The only time that we really spoke about African Americans and their impact was during Black History Month.” Jackie explained in her interview that she had studied the Civil Rights Movement in school, but in a way that “made it seem like it was something that was more of an issue going on in the past.” Now, however, she has learned that “there’s ... a large group of people that are still struggling to have equality” and noted that “it wasn’t until I got here [the university]” that “[I] saw...this is still something that is very prevalent.”

Our teacher candidates grew up with Barack Obama as president, and were likely exposed to public discourse that we were entering a post-racial era. However, by the time of the study (2015), the Black Lives Matter movement was coming to prominence; during class discussions, several participants explained the importance of the events of Ferguson, the verdict in the Trayvon Martin case, and the protests in Baltimore following Freddie Gray’s death. Closer to home, a racially charged incident highlighted tensions at our university. Our national and local context provided multiple examples to illustrate the ways racism is a present-day issue. Samuel observed

in his interview, “these issues have kind of always been around, but they’re considered modern issues almost in a way, because they’re talked about so much more now.”

Understanding Race is Socially Constructed, but Has Profound Impact

For some teacher candidates, the idea that race is socially constructed was new. We surveyed them about statements on the social construction of race, including (1) Race is a category that has been constructed by people but has no biological basis; and (2) Racial categories used to classify people in the United States change over time. Their responses showed a statistically significant increase in understanding that race is socially constructed between pre- and post-test results (see Table 2). The initial survey administered before the teacher candidates completed the racial literacy assignments yielded a mean of 3.76 out of 6 (1 = Disagree Strongly, 2 = Agree, 3 = Somewhat Disagree, 4 = Somewhat Agree, 5 = Agree, 6 = Strongly Agree) for the statement “Race is a category that has been constructed by people but has no biological basis”, while the post-survey yielded a mean of 4.83, a highly significant difference of 1.082. These findings indicate that nearly half of the candidates did not view race as socially constructed prior to the racial literacy discussion and assignments, whereas the majority agreed that race has no biological basis after they completed the course. A related finding of the survey was the increase in means for the statement, “Racial categories used to classify people in the United States change over time.” The mean response increased from 3.95 to 4.54, a similar finding to the statement about race not having a biological basis. These significant findings provide evidence that many of our candidates were not aware of key concepts related to race (i.e. that race is socially constructed and that it changes over time) until they completed the course work.

Table 2

Pre- and Post-Survey Means

Survey Question	Pre- or Posttest	N	Mean	Mean Difference	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
I am aware of resources available to me to address issues related to race in education.	Pretest	59	3.75	-1.082	-5.132	115	.000
	Posttest	58	4.83				
Race is a category that has been constructed by people but has no biological basis.	Pretest	58	3.76	-.785	-2.849	113	.005
	Posttest	57	4.54				
Racial categories used to classify people in the United States change over time	Pretest	59	3.95	-.595	-3.275	114	.001
	Posttest	57	4.54				

While it was important for candidates to know that race is not biological, it was also necessary for them to understand that it still shapes structural systems and life experiences in powerful ways. We heard these concepts directly echoed in some of the interviews, such as Alanah's:

It was really...big for me to realize that race is a social construct...if you were to have two blood samples, you wouldn't be able to distinguish one race from another...Then at the same time race is also who we are. It is part of our identity.

Courtney also brought up in her interview that she had a better understanding of the impact of race in education. She reported, "I feel like...a block has been removed, clearly not all the way, because I don't know everything that there is to know, but...I have a better understanding of just how race really does play a role."

Recognizing that Racism is Institutionalized in Education

Other scholars (Crowley & Smith, 2015; Pederson, Walker, & Wise, 2005) have shown that it can be difficult for teacher candidates, especially white participants, to see the structural elements of racism. We contend that a vital component of gaining racial literacy is understanding how racism is embedded in institutions such as schools, the justice system, health care, and government. Several candidates revealed in their interviews how they saw institutionalized racism in their field placements. Emily explained that she gained this understanding initially through our webquest activity that showed stories and statistics about racial disparities in education: "it was just really surprising to see the...connection, especially...students of color are much more likely to be disciplined much stricter or frequently with harsher consequences." She went on to recount a class discussion during which some fellow teacher candidates saw this trend in their field placements. Jeremy pointed out in his interview how he noticed the racial disparity between his student teaching site's International Baccalaureate (advanced) classes, which were primarily white, and his College Prep (regular track) classes, which were primarily racially minoritized students. Ruby did as well, even though she knew the College Prep "kids are smart," with "equal intelligence" to the honors students.

Some participants explained how the racial literacy assignments helped them understand how racism is institutionalized in education. Jackie discussed the second racial literacy paper in her interview, explaining that if she had not been directed to consider the representations of race in the curriculum in her student teaching placement, "it's something I probably wouldn't have noticed before." When asked in the interview about key ideas that she took away from the course, Courtney said,

Definitely that history is written by white people...the history that you read in books and that kids really get a lot of is the white version of history...You don't really hear about the Native American point of view. You don't really hear about the Black point of view...I didn't learn about the Japanese internment of World War II until I was in high school.

While we don't contend that all participants gained a thorough or nuanced understanding of systemic racism, the data suggested that many of them were able to become increasingly attuned to these issues, particularly in educational settings. This is a necessary first step, one that certainly must be extended and deepened in participants' future racial literacy development.

Gaining Practice Addressing Racially Stressful Situations

Racially stressful encounters manifest differently for different teacher candidates. In our classroom context, some of our white teacher candidates feared saying the wrong thing, felt guilty about their privilege, or believed it was not their place or responsibility to address issues of race. Emily discussed her realization that

there's a lot of things that I don't know and there's experiences that I don't have, that I probably never will have, that I have to just read about and learn about from my students and from their experiences. It was...a little humbling.

When asked if the racial literacy lessons were challenging, she also said, "it *was* difficult ... I was not part of this Civil Rights Movement. I'm a 21-year-old. ... I don't want to overstep my boundaries." Emily's age as well as her whiteness and her lack of experience noticing and addressing the ways racism impacts everyone caused her to feel some racial stress.

Other white teacher candidates said they have found difficulty in the past dealing with the emotionality of race work or understanding their privilege. Kira said, "I don't really like thinking about the politics [of race]...I've never been good at discussing those kinds of things." Moira declared, "I just see myself as a working class white chick that came from an okay family and is in college, so it's hard for me to think about my race impacting the things I do." However, Moira went on to note,

But...this class taught me it does impact, especially when I'm choosing the way I teach, because that's going to be a very important aspect of it. Because my race is reflected in my thoughts, my opinions; and my stance on race is reflected in my teaching.

Many of the white teacher candidates observed that talking about race and education in a structured and scaffolded environment helped them gain the ability to discuss race in a more productive way, helping address racial stress. As Samuel explained in his interview, "I just got to practice a lot talking about my own race and talking about other people's race and how that affects lives."

For other candidates, racial stress manifested in different ways. As we have found in another study that focused on the recruitment and retention of underrepresented groups in our teacher education programs (Flynn et al., 2014), racially minoritized participants in our programs were the target of microaggressions, faced outright racism, and felt weary from bearing the burden of being underrepresented and thus hypervisible in their university and/or teacher education program. Racially minoritized students in the present study spoke of similar experiences. These experiences happened throughout their educational careers. Jeremy, who identifies as half white and half Korean, explained in a course assignment that "anyone who's ever met me has tried to win at 'Where are you from?'" In her interview, Jessica discussed being called "Mulan" by elementary school classmates and said that teachers made assumptions about her math proficiency due to her Asian background. Jessica noted that her teacher education program, though, and particularly the class that specifically addressed racial literacy was welcoming and inclusive.

Marisa experienced racism throughout her school experiences. She reported in her interview that she remained in ESL classes in elementary school even after she gained fluency in English and was ready to be "challenged" rather than stuck in a classroom that was "too simple." In her teacher education courses, Marisa sometimes felt hypervisible, noting "I'm the only Hispanic

in my entire class.” She also explained that issues of race can be “kind of just brush[ed] over” or “sped through” in her program because “we don’t want to talk about the negative things and we don’t want anyone leaving the major.” Marisa felt that productive discussions of race had been lacking in her previous teacher education courses. She also sometimes feared the responses of her classmates when discussing placement of students in a nearby urban area:

Even though we have an African American president, not a lot of people are okay with that still. We’ve come a long way to get here, but I still feel like a lot of people aren’t on the same page about that. It’s always in the back of my mind because I’m a minority.

She experienced racial stress during the racial literacy lessons due to “not knowing what people were going to say.”

Similarly, Ciara noted in her interview that “in my classes I feel comfortable, but maybe on the campus I don’t feel as comfortable.” Though she said that her program generally was welcoming to racially minoritized students, she also explained that, as one of two students of color in her class, she experienced racial stress: “It definitely impacted our class in which we can incorporate race and without offending people.” She articulated the need for the university and for teacher education programs to be more diverse, explaining some of the work she had already done on this issue in a campus student group. Helping address the racial stress of racially minoritized teacher candidates, particularly in our overwhelmingly white teacher education programs, is something we continue to work on. Along with Ciara’s recommendation of working to diversify the teacher candidate pool, we persist in our efforts to confront and combat white supremacy, directly address white teacher candidates’ expressions of white fragility and microaggressions, and attend to the emotional needs and racial stress of racially minoritized teacher candidates. We also aim to avoid false parallels, emphasizing to our students that the ways white individuals experience racial stress are not equivalent in nature or impact to the racial stress experienced by racially minoritized individuals.

Developing Racial Literacy as a Professional Responsibility

A final important facet of racial literacy is our assertion that developing these skills and approaches is our professional obligation as educators. If teacher candidates see teacher education programs valuing and prioritize racial literacy, they are more likely to deem it as part of their professional obligation. Teacher candidates need to be prepared with expertise for engaging contested topics such as race in responsible ways that promote the well-being of their increasingly diverse classrooms (Arbaugh et al., 2015). Survey results showed a change in teacher candidates’ self-reported readiness to address race and education. The statement “I am aware of resources that are available to me to address issues related to race in education” showed a statistically significant increase between the pre- and post-survey (see Table 2; (pre-test $x = 3.75$, post-test $x = 4.83$). On the survey, teacher candidates also demonstrated increased awareness about the responsibility of white teachers to improve their racial literacy to effectively teach their students and about the need for more racially minoritized teachers. These survey questions helped us measure candidates’ view of the importance of racial literacy as a professional obligation.

Qualitative data also help illustrate this facet of racial literacy. When thinking about what role developing racial literacy would play in her future teaching, Emily noted in her interview,

it would help me to look at each of my students' identity, their racial identity and then who they are in...their family. What role do they play in their household? What role do they play in their community?...trying to look at the whole picture of one child and one family to really understand and assess their needs, instead of just...“Oh, they need to work on spelling.” To look at all of their needs instead of just their educational needs...one of [those] is definitely looking at their racial identity, and how that fits into our classroom, and how that may affect their interactions with other students or their own self-image.

Kurt also thought about his future students, explaining that as a white teacher,

I don't get to experience their life experiences so I kind of feel a little bit of a disconnect because, their experiences as...minority students and their worldviews, their perspectives...I don't get to see.

He articulated, “I have to take that step”—to continue growing and learning about race and education as he entered the profession.

Several candidates noted that our classes opened their eyes to the professional obligation to grow one's own racial literacy. Emily discussed how her class integrated issues of race throughout the semester:

It was a lot of self-reflection about, ‘This is what we're doing, do you notice anything in yourself? Do you notice the biases in yourself? Why do you think they're there?’ It was just brought up more consistently so that it was more natural to think about it when you're doing something, which is important because you shouldn't only think about it once it's become a problem. You should think about [racial equity] the whole time and when planning lessons.

On a related note, Moira explained that being conscious about issues of race in her content area of English Language Arts is now

kind of just in my head...in the background all the time. Is this unit diverse? Are these texts showing multiple voices? How are these voices being represented?...Are these kids actually thinking about the important issues at hand? It's there, and I think this course really made it be there. I don't think it probably would have even crossed my mind if I wasn't forced to think about it.

These candidates show how they gained greater awareness of their professional obligation to address race and racism as future teachers.

We also asked teacher candidates how they will continue to develop their racial literacy moving forward. Ruby noted that “the best thing to do to keep reading and keep connecting with other professional learning communities, and keep my ears open for other techniques, other strategies that maybe other teachers with more experience have.” Having a more concrete set of skills and resources was important to her, since she also said, “before...I knew I had to be conscious of everyone, but I wasn't sure how to go about it.” Samuel noted in his interview,

I think one thing that I'll continue to work with is just continuing to think about that idea of being the white man teaching students who are different from me, and especially using literature...from people of color...How do I present myself in a way...that doesn't maintain that same 'white man knows all and is teaching you about your culture' type of thing?

Samuel felt it was important to continue questioning his own stance and whiteness and how they impacted his teaching. Kurt viewed his future school/community members as potential resources for developing racial literacy. As he noted in his interview, he wants

to continue the conversations with my students, with their parents, with the communities, with other teachers...and then also staying up to date with the news...just never saying,... "I know how to perfectly cover the topic of race."...I just plan to continue investigating...to not give up on it and just think, 'I'm done,' because you know, we'll never be done.

Kurt also explained that addressing race and equity was vital as an educator, "because all of our kids need it." He went on,

All of them need to cover the topic of race. Race is hard to talk about until you've had practice talking about it, especially in English. English is all about social justice, and becoming literate...And so obviously, race is a huge part of that.

Many of the candidates, therefore, showed how they left the course with an understanding of the imperative to continue developing racial literacy as a professional educator.

Implications for Teacher Education

In the previous sections, we have shown how some of our teacher candidates demonstrated the aspects of racial literacy that we determined were important in our context. We emphasize with our candidates the ongoing, developmental nature of the racial literacy framework, sharing that it embodies a stance as well as skills. While this particular approach worked for our three groups of teacher candidates, other teacher educators can develop their own locally-specific variations to best meet the needs of their students.

We continue to face challenges in this work. To begin, we do not contend that all candidates demonstrated all of our objectives with consistency. For example, Shannon continued to exhibit deficit thinking when discussing parents in urban contexts who "don't care" about education, and Savannah contended that achievement gaps were based on the individual school and not present everywhere. It is our experience that focusing on the "literacy" aspect of racial literacy helps us deal with these shortcomings in a more productive way. When our participants appeared to resist, it was frustrating, but reading their racial analysis papers helped us understand how their experiences have shaped their worldview and gave us ideas to strategize how to proceed. The emphasis on continuing development, a lifelong commitment that spurs us to action, reminds us that just as our candidates need to continue to foster their racial literacy learning, so do we. At times, teachers and teacher educators can treat learning as undeviating, linear, and straightforward. However, it is rarely so direct, particularly with challenging subjects like race and racism. The framework of literacy can be helpful in theorizing the understandings and non-linear development of racial literacy. It is also true that without some means of measuring progress, we come only to the conclusion

‘everyone is different,’ which is not helpful. We continue to consider how the racial literacy framework must contend with the consequences on actual students’ lives and how we can prepare teacher

candidates who are ‘safe to practice’ given their varying racial literacy commitments, stances, and skills.

In a 2017 issue of *English Education*, Baker-Bell et al. (2017) point out that Critical Race English Education (CREE) works to “nam[e] and dismantle[e] white supremacy and anti-Black and anti-Brown racism” (p. 123). They further “raise the following question: *What should be the responsibility of all English Educators in the wake of terror, death, and racial violence?*” [emphasis original] (Baker-Bell et al. 2017, p. 123) and call for teachers to consider the following steps:

- 1) Engage in critical self-reflection, specifically working through the ways in which their own positionalities influence their pedagogical practices and the ways they perceive Black and Brown youth.
- 2) (Re)imagine...classrooms as sites for healing and racial justice.
- 3) Engage *all* youth in concentrated and serious dialogues about how white supremacy, anti-Blackness, anti-Brownness, homophobia, and other forms of xenophobia lead to race-based violence (p. 125).

These words continue to resonate as we write this article in the wake of a new wave of violence against racially minoritized people, with the killings of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, and public acts of violence against the Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) community. As teacher educators concerned with equity and justice, we take this call to action seriously. We prepare teachers who will themselves teach future police officers, politicians, judges, doctors, community activists, and more. We want those future teachers and students to be agents of change, especially as related to systemic racism, following the CREE guidelines articulated above.

In addition to focusing attention on persistent anti-Black racism in the U.S., worldwide protests have amplified the importance of initiating reform efforts in education. We must ensure that students have opportunities across their K-16 schooling to learn about the ways race and racism are inscribed in the history and current circumstances of our country, our institutions, and our individual lives. In short, we need to become racially literate, and as teacher educators, we must prioritize this goal. We believe there is a need to collaborate with colleagues to integrate racial literacy throughout the curriculum, in order to foster deep learning that prepares antiracist teachers. Engaging in this project has provided a productive and generative learning experience for us both as teachers and researchers. We persist in striving for understanding of and facilitating our own and our teacher candidates’ racial literacy growth. The collaboration we have experienced in both phases of this project has sustained us and allowed us to vent our frustrations, brainstorm solutions to classroom dilemmas, and renew our energy to continue. We argue that the racial literacy framework supports an ongoing process that can lead to important racial understanding and impetus to act. We maintain that it is vital for teacher educators to remind themselves that race work is a process, and to share this idea with their teacher candidates as well. We argue for a more productive, literacy-based conception of teacher candidates’ engagement with race work. We further advocate for deliberate, spiraling curricula that returns to this work multiple times in order to foster deeper learning and engagement. As Baker-Bell et al. (2017) remind us, we have a solemn responsibility as teachers to counteract racial violence and foster racial understanding and justice.

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