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The Power of Picturebooks to Support Early Elementary Teachers' Racial Literacy in Communities of Practice: An Example from the 3Rs (Reading, Racial Equity, Relationships)

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Abstract
In this article, we provide an overview of the ways one ecosystem-based literacy program uses high quality racially affirming picturebooks with kindergarten-third grade teachers within communities of practice to develop racial literacy and enact more effective and equitable reading practices. Racial literacy here refers to teachers' ability to understand the ways in which race and racism impact reading instruction and reading outcomes in their classrooms. High quality racially affirming picturebooks offer teachers important access to race-based content in ways that are accessible, emotional, and deeply pedagogical. We explore connections between racial literacy and reading practice, the role of high quality racially affirming picturebooks in this work, and provide examples of how we use these books, and the ways they support racial literacy development. Finally, we present a case study highlighting an example of our partner teachers engaging in this work that showcases the role of racial literacy in the development and delivery of effective and equitable reading practices.

Keywords Picturebooks · Racial literacy · Communities of practice · Culturally informed pedagogies · Literacy instruction

Reading proficiently by the end of third grade is not only a crucial educational benchmark, but a critical life skill that contributes to all other learning. Notably, students are four times less likely to graduate if they are not reading at grade level by the end of third grade. Widely documented, historic racial disparities exist in reading proficiency. Most recently, in 2022, only 12% of Black 4th−graders in Pennsylvania, a mid-Atlantic state in the United States in which our research occurred, scored proficient or above on reading on national tests; the figure for white 4th-graders was 51% (USDOE, NAEP 2022). Whereas racial disparities in reading outcomes for Black children are broadly recognized, evidence-based reading interventions rarely focus on Black children or respond to the role of race in reading disparities at all (e.g., Milner, 2020). Traditional remediation approaches to addressing lagging reading scores may be effective at improving specific skills but have not been effective in reducing overall disparities. The time for innovative approaches that address these inequities is long past due.

The 3Rs (Reading, Racial Equity, and Relationships) Initiative is an ecosystem-based program that aims to improve early literacy outcomes, particularly for Black students, in an urban county in Pennsylvania. The 3Rs is one cohort of a larger university-community collaborative working towards the collective goal of promoting child thriving from birth to age eighteen (see Ettinger et al., 2021 for more information). The 3Rs was created by the Early School Age Cohort of the larger collaborative, tasked with improving literacy for kindergarten through 3rd grade students. Using a four-strand approach, the 3Rs focuses on supporting children's early literacy ecosystem by working closely with their families, classroom teachers, community organizations, and local leaders. This model was conceived with the understanding that literacy does not develop in isolation but should be understood as a transaction between a child and their ecosystem (i.e., their family, community, and their school; Jaeger, 2016). Each of the four strands of the 3Rs develops

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and delivers unique, responsive programming to support literacy development across the child's ecosystem. Yet across all strands, the 3Rs uses high quality, racially affirming picturebooks within communities of practice for *adult* learning to promote more equitable reading instruction.

In this article, we will present an overview of the ways in which one strand of the 3Rs, the 3Rs *Classroom* Strand, uses picturebooks with early elementary teachers and staff to promote equitable and effective reading practices in kindergarten through third grade classrooms. Our work draws on research into the science of reading (e.g., Petscher et al., 2020), critical pedagogy (e.g., Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014; Muhammad, 2020; Paris, 2012), and teacher learning (e.g., Piasta et al., 2017; Kennedy, 2016) within communities of practice to support equitable reading instruction. A key component of our work is developing teachers' racial literacy, or the ability to understand the ways in which race and racism impact reading instruction and reading outcomes in their classrooms. We first share the theoretical background of this work, followed by examples of how we have used picturebooks within communities of practice to develop teacher's racial literacy. Finally, we will present a case study highlighting an example of our teacher-authors engaging in this work.

Given the nature of this work, we want to acknowledge the identities of our collaborative team of co-authors, as we occupy different roles (i.e., researchers, teachers, students; Levitt et al., 2018). Spear and Briggs are both white educational researchers who serve as facilitators of the 3Rs Classroom Strand, and broadly focus on teacher learning and equitable literacy instruction in early education. Our teacher-authors, Sanchez and Woody, are both Black educators who work as reading support staff at a 3Rs partner school. Ponce-Cori is a Peruvian doctoral student who focuses on identity and social justice practices to create safe spaces for children and adolescents. We acknowledge that our different roles and positionalities impact the way we view, frame, and make sense of this work. We embrace these differences, striving for transparency and openness in naming biases, perspective, strengths, and goals in order to partner and engage in mutually beneficial work.

Theoretical Background

Educational researchers and policy makers often frame racial disparities in reading outcomes as "achievement gaps" (Kelly et al, 2021; Ladson-Billings, 2006), but this deficit-based approach blames students, families, and communities for experiences caused by structural barriers that are rooted in unjust systems (e.g., racism, capitalism, ableism). Racial disparities in reading outcomes are better understood as the result of unjust policies, practices, and procedures that result in some students receiving unequal access to opportunities that lead to positive literacy outcomes; as such these disparities are far more appropriately framed as opportunity gaps (e.g., Gorski, 2019; Milner, 2012). Opportunity gaps are complex structural issues, related to multiple interacting inequitable systems (e.g., school funding, segregation, unjust housing opportunities, teacher training issues, inequitable access to high quality early childhood opportunities, challenging curriculum). These types of structural issues require complex, interconnected and structural solutions. Addressing nationwide racial disparities in reading outcomes cannot, therefore, only be the job of individual teachers. At the same time, our educational structures are made up of individuals (e.g., teachers, administrators, teacher educators), and we all have a part to play in disrupting inequitable systems. One way that teachers can powerfully impact the reading and learning experiences of their students is to engage in more culturally relevant and responsive pedagogies, which aim to disrupt the cultural hegemony, or white-centric nature, of schools, classrooms, curriculum, and reading practices (e.g., Gay, 2010).

Culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1995), responsive (Gay, 2000), and sustaining (Paris, 2012) pedagogies are distinct but related approaches from a larger field of critical pedagogies (e.g., Kelly et al., 2021; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris & Alim, 2014) that are designed to support academic success and critical consciousness, in an effort to disrupt the status quo and sources of inequities typical in most US schools. These distinct yet connected "culturally informed" pedagogies (Kelly et al., 2021) are multifaceted approaches to instruction that includes key tenets such as (a) viewing students' cultural backgrounds as resources and assets to inform instructional design; (b) maintaining high expectations for all students; (c) offering opportunities for collective, collaborative learning; and (d) offering students' opportunities to question contexts and systems that create and sustain inequities. In a literacy context, culturally informed pedagogies involve applying these tenets to students' reading, writing, and language learning opportunities in a myriad of ways, from the texts and curricular materials students engage with, to grouping strategies, explicit literacy skill instruction, language opportunities (e.g., rich opportunities to engage in discourse, supporting home languages and literacies), connections with students' families and communities, and the promotion of critical literacy (e.g., Fairbanks et al., 2009; Kelly et al., 2021). In these ways, culturally informed approaches go beyond related multicultural and social justice education approaches (e.g., Banks, 2013, Kaczmarczyk et al., 2019) that use literacy approaches to build students' social awareness. Although culturally informed pedagogies attend to these critical factors, the focus on the cognitive development of students from marginalized

backgrounds are distinct (Hammond, 2021) and a key way in which these pedagogies aim to *disrupt* inequities.

Racial Literacy

Indeed, at their core, these culturally informed pedagogies are critical frameworks (Gorski, 2016), rooted in theories of justice that aim to name and disrupt structural systems of oppression (e.g., racism) that lead to inequitable educational outcomes. To enact culturally informed literacy instruction toward this purpose, teachers need a fundamental understanding of the ways in which structural inequities are maintained and replicated in schools across multiple levels, and their role in both replicating and disrupting these inequities. This work is predicated on teachers' racial literacy, or the "capacity to decipher the durable racial grammar that structures racialized hierarchies and frames the narrative of our republic" (Guinier, 2004; p. 100). In an educational context, racial literacy refers to the skills and practices by which teachers understand and navigate the impacts of race and racism in school structures, family and student relationships, and teaching practices (e.g., Sealey-Ruiz, 2013). Teachers need racial literacy to notice and analyze the role of race and racism in their reading practices, and therefore enact effective and equitable reading practices.

Racial literacy has been studied most in the context of preservice teacher education (e.g., Flynn et al., 2018; Rogers & Mosley, 2008; Rolón-Dow et al., 2020; Sealey-Ruiz, 2011) in studies that aim to explore the ways in which racial literacy is influenced by preservice teachers' own racial identity, and how this impacts their views of education and practice. Less research has focused on documenting the role of racial literacy on practicing teachers (c.f. Skerrett, 2011; Stevenson, 2014). Yet across the research on racial literacy, there are clear commonalities (e.g., a focus on critical self-reflection, the importance of dialogue, applications of a structural lens when analyzing or designing curricular materials) and foundational theoretical frameworks (see Rolon-Dow et al., 2020; Sealey-Ruiz, 2021) that apply to both preservice and practicing teachers.

In the United States, very few teacher education programs systematically address racial literacy (e.g., Sleeter, 2017). In addition, the vast majority of practicing early childhood and elementary teachers are white (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021), and therefore less likely to have lived experiences that support them in developing a racial literacy lens. Therefore, many teachers need support in developing racial literacy, particularly as it applies to their teaching practices (Picower, 2021; Sealey-Ruiz, 2021). Once in service, however, teachers' professional development opportunities are often one-time trainings aimed at specific skills or knowledge disconnected from practice, or they are conferences or trainings that individual teachers must seek out independently and therefore disjointed from teachers' school and classroom contexts (e.g., Kelly et al., 2021; Leonard & Woodland, 2022). Although these types of professional development approaches are common, they are often ineffective (e.g., Desimone, 2009; Kennedy, 2016), particularly for trainings that address in depth constructs like racial literacy.

Indeed, most research on racial literacy highlights the fact that it is multifaceted, involving multiple interconnected factors (e.g., teachers' beliefs, knowledge, experiences, positionality, pedagogical reasoning), and that changes in racial literacy are rooted in deep reflection, relationships, and dialogue (e.g., Rolon-Dow et al., 2020; Sealey-Ruiz, 2021). To shift teachers' racial literacy in ways that lead to culturally informed pedagogies that disrupt inequities, teachers need to make integrative shifts in their knowledge, beliefs, and practice, and therefore require ongoing contextual and collaborative engagement in professional learning opportunities. Communities of practice may be particularly suited to provide the types of supports teachers need to develop stronger racial literacy. Communities of practice can take many forms (e.g., teacher-only networks often framed as professional learning communities, cross-sector or organizational collaboratives), but broadly are conceptualized as collaborative networks, typically embedded within schools, where teachers, administrators, coaches, and other school support staff come together to address problems of practice within their specific contexts (e.g., literacy practices, student-centered approaches, culturally relevant practice; Vescio et al., 2008). There is a growing body of evidence that school-based communities of practice can be effective at promoting teacher learning, engagement, collaboration, and practice change (Blitz & Shulman, 2016; Lomos et al., 2011), given their focus on collaborative inquiry, deep relationships, and teacher learning as a means of shifting practice. As such, communities of practice are uniquely positioned to provide the type of teacher learning opportunities associated with racial literacy, which require in depth, collaborative contexts where teachers are able to explore the ways their own knowledge, beliefs, experiences, positionality, and practice intersect in order to adopt the type of culturally informed pedagogies that will lead to effective and equitable literacy instruction (e.g., Kelly et al., 2021; Leonard & Woodland, 2022).

The Current Project: The 3Rs Classroom Strand

The 3Rs Classroom Strand draws on these lines of research, with special attention to the roles of communities of practice within each of our partner schools, teachers' racial literacy, and picturebooks as the key mechanism for connection and practice. More specifically, when we consider how to

support teachers in enacting culturally informed pedagogies aimed at equitable reading instruction, we focus on developing racial literacy within and across communities of practice by choosing and using high quality, racially affirming picturebooks.

We define high quality, racially affirming picturebooks as those that provide children with literacy experiences that feature characters and plots that are representative and affirming of their racial and cultural identities. For this project however, we intentionally chose picturebooks that feature Black characters across multiple identities (e.g., gender, disability, ethnicity), as educational opportunity gaps often impact Black children acutely. Moreover, our choice to focus on picturebooks that feature Black characters is critical for teachers working to enact more equitable and effective reading practices. Although race is but one identity that teachers should explore when delivering culturally informed pedagogies, teachers often express significant discomfort around racial identity (e.g., Milner, 2017), particularly in early childhood and elementary contexts where widespread beliefs that children are "colorblind" are common (Winkler, 2009). This coupled with the pervasive anti-Blackness that undergirds much of educational policies, materials, and practices (e.g., Wynter-Hoyte et al., 2022), all point to a critical need for teacher learning opportunities that center Blackness and promote structural understandings of oppression and inequities through a race lens. As such, the 3Rs Classroom Strand intentionally uses picturebooks that center Black characters in a wide range of joyful, complex, and nuanced contexts to promote teacher learning.

Our communities of practice are made up of both large and small groups at each of our partner schools that engage in ongoing learning opportunities over the course of multiple school years. Each community of practice is made up of an array of school staff (teachers, coaches, administrators), however for the purpose of this article, we are using the term teachers broadly. Our partner schools commit to at least ten hours of professional development for all their K-3 teachers each year (i.e., large group, required sessions), and then teachers are able to join smaller, bi-weekly Professional Learning Communities to take a deeper dive into the topics explored in the large group (i.e., small group, opt-in sessions). Although these two approaches have distinct dynamics and approaches, we consider them broadly as communities of practice in that they are ongoing, collaborative, contextual, and relationship-based.

Unlocking the Power of Picture Books in Communities of Practice

Notably, picturebooks are consistently used as the primary mechanism by which we center session content across both large and small group communities of practice. Picturebooks are a staple in early childhood and elementary teaching practice, which is part of what makes them such useful tools for developing teachers' racial literacy. In the 3Rs Classroom Strand, we carefully select high quality, racially affirming picturebooks using an adapted tool designed to examine the cultural responsiveness of curricular programs (Bryan-Gooden et al., 2019). Our tool considers a number of factors, including **representation** (e.g., *who is depicted and how, accuracy and complexity of characters, the ways in which identities are explored*), **social justice orientation** (e.g., *centering multiple perspectives, disrupting the status quo, power explorations, opportunities to connect to real life and action*), and **quality** (e.g., *authenticity of characters, developmental considerations, artistic presentation, interaction of text and illustrations*).

This process helps us ensure that the texts we are using have potential to promote *both* child *and* teacher learning. For children, literacy learning occurs best when they have access to a wide range of picturebooks that are used in identity-affirming ways that help them build a strong sense of self and understanding of others and the larger world around them (e.g., Botelho & Rudman, 2009; Crawford et al., 2019; Muhammad, 2020). Picturebooks that allow young children to see themselves, their families, and their communities reflected (i.e., mirrors), and to learn about the wider world around them (i.e., windows) in warm, authentic narratives are critical. So too are picturebooks that are multifaceted and encourage children to understand the complexities of the world, including topics such as history, justice, and collective action (i.e., prisms; Bishop, 1990; Krishnaswami, 2019). However, to work in this way, teachers need to first know how to choose and use picturebooks effectively.

For teachers, picturebooks can be tools for learning important historical and cultural content, for making connections to their own learning, emotions, identities, and experiences, and for planning more culturally informed reading practices (e.g., Crawford et al., 2019; Freeman et al., 2011). Traditional teacher education approaches often focus on issues of race as separate from pedagogy, focusing only on macrosocial patterns or educator bias (e.g., Sleeter, 2017). High quality, racially affirming picturebooks offer teachers important access to race-based content in ways that are accessible, emotional, and deeply pedagogical. As such, within our 3Rs Classroom Strand communities of practice, we use picturebooks as both content and pedagogical tools. Indeed, we have used picturebooks in over 100 professional learning sessions and have seen the way that picturebooks can disarm participants and make them more open, vulnerable, and willing to talk about race, and reflect on its role in their practice. Beyond their content and pedagogical links, however, much of the power of picturebooks is related to these latter points—the way they can help teachers practice talking about and reflecting on race *collectively*.

Picturebooks, therefore, are also critical relational tools that we use to not only support teachers' relationships with their students, families, and materials, but with us and their colleagues as well. We think deeply and talk openly in communities of practice about the ways in which our different positionalities can impact our relationships, both within the community of practice and the larger school context (see Wanless et al., 2022, for details on this process). As such, the communities of practice become a place where we collaborate to strengthen our individual and collective learning, a place to have challenging conversations within a community, and a place where we can practice, make mistakes, and commit to growing and learning. Picturebooks are the anchors that help us root the personal and relational work to literacy practices.

Using Picturebooks in Communities of Practice to Develop Racial Literacy

Within the 3Rs Classroom Strand communities of practice, a key focus of our collaborative learning with picturebooks is building racial literacy. Here, we draw on multiple theories, with the idea that racial literacy is a multifaceted construct, with multiple pathways in to support development and growth. We draw on the work of Sealey-Ruiz (2021) in particular, with the notion that **critical love** (the profound ethical commitment to the communities we serve and participate in) is foundational to racial literacy, and that **critical self-reflection**, within communities of learning, is the tool by which racial literacy grows. Within the 3Rs, we build on these aspects of racial literacy, while also attending to other components that we have observed impacting teachers' understanding and actions around race in a wide range of ways. Broadly speaking, these components include teachers' **personal** (e.g., beliefs, knowledge, emotions, experiences), **relational** (e.g., communication, self-awareness, empathy, humility), and **pedagogical** (e.g., practice, planning, pedagogical reasoning around the role of race in teaching) racial literacy. Though work remains to fully understand the ways these components of racial literacy impact practice, for the purposes of this article we simply aim to describe the ways in which teachers' engagement with picturebooks offer opportunities for racial literacy development. Table 1 provides an overview of our framework of racial literacy.

In the remainder of this article, we describe examples from various communities of practice that illustrate the way reflection and dialogue around picturebooks can elicit deep engagement *and* productive discomfort, and how this process is both informed by and offers space for exploring and expanding participants' racial literacy. The examples we share illustrate themes that have emerged across sessions. We also provide a case study of Sanchez and Woody who have participated in the 3Rs Classroom Strand communities of practice at their school and are using their racial literacy to supplement curriculum with high quality, racially affirming picturebooks in the classroom.

3Rs Classroom Strand Examples

Across communities of practice, we use picturebooks as the anchor for session content, which focuses on specific aspects of equitable and effective literacy instruction. In each session, the picturebook is read aloud, typically by 3–4 teacher volunteers, and is always followed by reflection questions and discussions that aim to shift multiple aspects of racial literacy. Teachers' reactions and responses to the picturebooks often illustrate variations in racial literacy. Although the picturebooks are intentionally chosen to support deep exploration of the session topic, it is truly the picturebooks' power to elicit honest reflection and personal and pedagogical dialogue that create such rich ground for racial literacy exploration. Indeed, a key goal of our 3Rs Classroom Strand

Table 1 Overview of racial literacy components

Critical Reflection *to promote racial literacy*		
Components	Aspects	Definition
Personal	Racial Beliefs	Deeply engrained beliefs about race that drive choices/behaviors
	Racial Experiences	Experiences, interactions, positionality that shape understanding of race
	Racial Emotions	Emotions that come up in response to race or racism
	Racial Knowledge	Content Knowledge (historical, cultural, developmental) that informs our understanding of race
Relational	Racial Humility	Awareness and acceptance of the limits of our own beliefs, knowledge, experiences, and worldviews related to race
	Racial Communication	How we frame and make sense of race and communicate with others
Pedagogical	Racial Insights on Practice	The ways in which we consider the role of race in our teaching practices
	Racial Teaching	How we approach teaching about race with our students

Critical Love *(i.e., profound ethical commitment) as foundation*

communities of practice is to help teachers develop the racial literacy to use picturebooks in practice, as the anchor of children's reading instruction, and to effectively enact culturally informed pedagogy. We believe that it is this highly practical and pedagogical connection that also helps teachers engage deeply in vulnerable ways, and that when teachers are able to tap into their critical love—their commitment to helping their students thrive—that this is when racial literacy begins to shift and grow. In the next section, we provide example interactions within our various communities of practice in response to three picturebooks that illustrate the racial literacy components, and highlight ways teachers' personal, relational, and pedagogical racial literacy interact and are necessary to lead to practice change.

Example 1: *Saturday*

The picturebook *Saturday* (Mora, 2019) is the story of a young Black girl and her mother who set out to enjoy a perfectly planned Saturday. However, their perfect day doesn't go quite as planned. They soon find that it is more important who you spend your time with than how you spend your time. This book was used at each of our partner schools to explore topics related to taking an ecosystem approach to literacy development, and the role of family and community literacy practices. In response to reading this picturebook, we observed the following interaction between two teachers at one partner school:

> A teacher comments that she would use this book with her students because they could all relate to the feeling of being loved by a mother. A colleague follows this comment by offering ideas for expanding her thinking to be more inclusive, asking children to identify any important adult who the story reminds them of, and offered that she would model this with students by sharing that the story reminds her of her grandmother.

In this exchange between two teachers, we observed multiple components of racial literacy impacting teachers' thinking and interactions. Of note are the ways in which teachers' racial humility and racial communication shifted their understanding of the book. In the first teacher's initial response to *Saturday* (i.e., all students can relate to the feeling of being loved by a mother) we see evidence of a limited worldview in her overgeneralization of children's experiences. Yet of note, just prior to this response, she acknowledged to the group that she hadn't always chosen books that reflected her students' identities or lived experiences and was actively working to do so. As such we can see how she is both beginning to develop racial humility within the community of practice (seeing and acknowledging limits in the books she is using) yet is still limited in her awareness of different perspectives (overgeneralization). The second teacher's response to her, however, is evidence of why the community of practice is such a valuable space for developing racial literacy skills. Her colleague immediately recognized the potential harm of this overgeneralization, and, in critical love, she *communicate*d an alternative way to think about the book and its relationship to students. She also showed evidence of pedagogical racial literacy in the way she offered connections to practice (*ask* students…; *model* for them…) in her response. Taken together, this example illustrates the range of racial literacy that often exists within 3Rs Classroom Strand communities of practice and how using picturebooks, in relationship, has the potential to support the development of racial literacy.

Example 2: *The ABCS of Black History*

Our second example comes from a reading of the book *The ABCS of Black History* (Cortez & Semmer, 2020), which takes readers, letter by letter, through a profound celebration of Black history. Our team chose to read this book across communities of practice for the depth of information it brings not only to children, but to adult learners as well. From famous Black queens to critical places and spaces in history, the book offers readers a wealth of knowledge and opportunities for learning, using vibrant illustrations and child-friendly language. In response to reading this picturebook, we observed the following in one school's community of practice:

> Many teachers in the community of practice stated that they would hesitate to use this book in practice, noting there were components they did not know enough about, and concerns with some of the history portrayed (e.g., the letter 'P' page talks about power, presidents, and has a picture of a Black Panther). After listening, a teacher noted that he had already used the book with his first grade class. Before using the book, he sent a letter home to parents letting them know his plans for use. He reported that parents thanked him for bringing Black history to his classroom. He shared the ways he presented content in developmentally appropriate ways to students.

This interaction was indicative of many responses to this picturebook across our communities of practice. Although we used this text to make space and time for teachers to explore their own personal racial literacy, teachers often expressed that they would *not* be comfortable using this book in their classrooms. Teachers shared that they thought the book may be too complex for students, or covered topics they were uncomfortable addressing with young children (e.g., the Black Panther Party/Hughey P. Newton; diaspora). In the example detailed above, however, we saw a teacher counter this resistance in a highly effective way, disrupting

teachers' hesitancies by sharing how he had had already successfully used this book in practice with first graders. He framed this all pedagogically, noting the choices he made to honor families and ensure use of the book was developmentally appropriate for his students.

This example surfaces an important tension that we observe often in this work, as we do not want teachers to engage in classroom conversations about race unprepared. This does not mean we want teachers to shy away from having hard or honest conversations—but rather that we want teachers to reflect, practice, and learn. As a teacher in another school's community of practice shared, teachers shouldn't practice these conversations for the first time with other people's children; instead, practice here, within your school's communities of practice, with your colleagues. However, we consistently see teachers using fear of getting the conversation wrong, to avoid addressing race rather than an opportunity to grow. Teachers need space to work through all these aspects of racial literacy, and to see examples of effective practice modeled.

As the example above illustrates, the teacher in question seemed to be aware of this and centered his pedagogical racial literacy to model an alternative approach to his colleagues. This was also predicated by his strong personal and relational racial literacy, as he drew on his own knowledge and beliefs to plan and implement this instruction, and his racial communication and humility to offer his colleagues a different perspective. After he shared this example, another colleague leaned in and shared the ways she too had used this picturebook in practice. This lead to important dialogue about the pedagogical decisions these teachers made in bringing this book to their students, and the ways in which their own positionality (as teachers of color) impacted that process, and how other teachers from different racial backgrounds might approach this work. After this session, multiple teachers across this community of practice reported that they had purchased this book on their own and were planning to use it in practice.

Example 3: *Julian is a Mermaid*

Our final example features the picturebook *Julian is a Mermaid* (Love, 2018). In this story, a Black boy dreams of becoming a mermaid and, with the help of his grandmother, he finally has a chance. This book was selected by a teacher to discuss with his colleagues in their community of practice where teachers often bring problems of practice to explore with the group. During this community of practice, we observed the following:

> The teacher shared *Julian is a Mermaid* as a picturebook he was considering and raised two problems of practice: (a) navigating books on complex, intersectional identities (i.e., a Black child exploring gender identity), and (b) creating a viable classroom approach to sharing picturebooks. This led to a robust dialogue amongst participants in the small group community of practice where they discussed their own emotions, examples of student-centered dialogue, and their instructional and library management approaches.

This example illustrates complex interactions between teachers' personal, relational, and pedagogical racial literacy. In terms of personal racial literacy, the teachers engaged deeply with their own emotional responses to the picturebook, and its use in practice. Teachers talked openly about their concerns with reading a book that explored gender identity, particularly their uncertainty about how families may react to them having discussions with students about non-traditional gender identities. Although in many cases we have observed discomfort and fear leading teachers to pause or resist bringing picturebooks or content into practice, in this community of practice teachers openly grappled with their emotions together with a frame toward moving into practice. For instance, teachers here noted that they had originally been uncomfortable about books focused on race, and how working together had helped them alleviate their discomfort, knowing that if they made a mistake, a group of colleagues would challenge and support them in communicating productively with their students. This example highlights the role of relational racial literacy, and the importance of reflection and dialogue in this work. We also see strong examples of humility and awareness of how differing positionality (amongst themselves, and in relation to their students and families) impacts the reading of picturebooks. Teachers used different pages and illustrations from the book to think through tensions that might arise given different cultural values amongst families, and talked through the conversations these pages could spark, with children and with families.

This latter point illustrates the ways teachers' personal and relational racial literacy were connected to their pedagogical racial literacy. Their dialogue and planning was consistently rooted in their commitment to their students' learning—understanding that part of the goals of culturally informed pedagogy is providing students opportunities to examine sociocultural and historical contexts and systems that shape our world, in asset-based ways that draw on students' own identities. The teachers noted their commitment to this pedagogical approach and ensuring that they were respecting students' and families' cultural values and norms. At the same time, teachers noted their own pedagogical commitment to helping students build awareness, comfort, and joy across multiple identities, as this book explores positive family interactions around gender identity within the Black community. Together, they collectively discussed ways to

use this picturebook, which centers an Afro-Latino boy exploring his love of mermaids in ways that challenge gender norms and open discussions around gender identities, in practice—in ways that centered student voice and dialogue. They also talked through approaches to introducing these texts to students in ways that weighed the logistical (e.g., library management, book care), developmental (e.g., differences in student-led conversations across grades), and contextual (e.g., how to introduce themes around diversity, to communicate with families, to align multiple picturebooks across themes).

This final example is a strong illustration of the interconnectedness between the components of racial literacy. We also want to emphasize that this was a teacher-led workshop, and there is a significant amount of relational racial literacy that is necessary for teachers to engaged openly and honestly with these questions and ask each other for feedback on and support with their reading practices. Teachers' ability to have empathy for each other and their students' families without losing sight of their pedagogical commitments to student learning and growth are also notable. This example illustrates the potential of communities of practice to support the interconnected racial literacy growth that can lead to shifts in practice.

Case Study: Picturebooks in Action

Collectively, these illustrations highlight the way the 3Rs Classroom Strand uses picturebooks to engage with teachers, within communities of practice, to support their development of racial literacy. In our final section, we share an example of two early elementary teachers who have used their racial literacy to enact culturally informed pedagogies to disrupt inequities in their school, noting that this is but one example of their practice. Sanchez and Woody are an instructional coach and reading specialist, respectively, at one of our partner schools. Both teacher-authors have been highly engaged in their schools' large and small group community of practice, openly sharing their insights and reflections in response to picturebooks and engaging with and supporting their colleagues. They noted that their experience in the 3Rs Classroom Strand has been particularly rewarding in that they have had a chance to collaborate with fellow teachers, helping them choose and use picturebooks, as well as design and coordinate culturally responsive projects that connect to the curriculum. Notably, as is illustrated in the case study below, they have also used their experiences with the 3Rs Classroom Strand as a catalyst to review their ELA curriculum through a new lens, by adapting content that reflects and supports their students' literacy development through the use of high quality racially affirming picturebooks.

In this case study, we hear specifically about our teacher-authors' experiences, and the ways in which they drew on their own personal, relational, and pedagogical racial literacy to navigate the curricular review process being explored their school's community of practice, where teachers were reflecting on their instruction and larger curricular concerns. In response to this discussion, the 3Rs team shared an article (Khan et al., 2022) examining the cultural responsiveness of widely used elementary ELA curriculum. According to the article, the three popular curricular programs that were reviewed were all deemed "culturally destructive" for students. In other words, Kahn and colleagues found that the programs feature superficial visual representations of diversity, are dominated by one-sided storytelling, include demeaning and dehumanizing language, and give little to no guidance for engaging students' background or prior knowledge. Among the curricula explored in the article was McGraw Hill's (2023) Wonders curriculum; like all our partner schools, Sanchez and Woody's school uses a version of this program. However, at this school, administrators give teachers notable autonomy and support to address pedagogical and curricular issues that arise. We see this demonstrated in Sanchez and Woody's response in the case study below:

> In response to reading Khan et al. (2022), we worked together to do a deep dive into our Wonders curriculum to review the stories mentioned in the article, and to examine any other stories that might be culturally destructive for our early elementary students. Kahn and colleagues identified a number of themes from their review, and we intentionally looked for these themed in our curriculum review. For the purpose of this case study, we are sharing examples of one Wonders unit per grade (K-3) and the culturally destructive story we identified within the unit. In Table 2, we highlight the culturally destructive aspects of each story and recommend an alternate picturebook, each of which aligns with the instructional goals of the weekly unit.
>
> The stories we identified yielded culturally destructive patterns including (a) lack of diversity in authorship, (b) one-sided portrayals of Africa/African culture, (c) very few, if any, stories featuring characters of color and, (d) the limited stories that did feature characters of color being told through an oppression lens. For example, we noticed a stark absence of Black characters or characters of color throughout the Kindergarten and 2nd grade units, wherein white characters and animals were the primary protagonists. In the stories that did feature characters of color, such as in Families Work, there was no information related to identity apart from the pictures - even the characters' names were stereotypically white. When characters

Table 2 Examples of countering culturally destructive curriculum using picturebooks

Wonders unit and title story	Picturebook and counter approach
Kindergarten—Target Question: What do living things need to grow? **My Garden*** (Henkes, 2010)**:** *A young white girls dreams of a garden that grows chocolate rabbits, tomatoes as big as beach balls, flowers that change color, and seashells* *Of the 30 stories in the unit, 16 center white protagonists (including story above), 12 center animals, and 2 center Black characters	***Harlem Grown*** (Hillery & Hartland, 2020)**:** *The true story of "Mr. Tony," a Black man from Harlem, who partners with students from a local school to turn a vacant lot into a beautiful garden for their community* • **Representations of Diversity:** Positive visual representation of a black male community leader, a black girl, students, and teachers • **Positive Language**: Black characters are portrayed as caring, change makers, collaborative, encouraging, and resilient • **Guidance for Background or Prior Knowledge:** Represents community, urban living/gardening; includes authors note; gardening resources • **Storytelling:** True story of author Tony Hillery
Grade 1—Target Question: How can weather affect us? **Rain School*** (Rumford, 2010)**:** *Determined to receive a quality education, the children in Chad, Africa build their own school. After they complete the school year, the rains come and destroys the school building* *Only 1 of 2 stories out of 15 in unit to center Black characters	***Come on Rain*** (Hesse & Muth, 1999)**:** *Tess and friends anticipate the long-awaited rainstorm. When the rain comes, they experience joy in numerous ways* • **Representations of Diversity:** Positive Visual Representation of Black Characters • **Positive Language**: Black characters are portrayed as caring, fun, loving, friendly, joyful, adventurous • **Guidance for Background or Prior Knowledge:** Includes poetry, metaphors, and similes in text related to weather (*unit question*) • **Storytelling:** Not an oppression narrative
Grade 2—Target Question: How do families and friends learn, grow, and help one another? **Families Work***(McGraw Hill, 2017)**:** *Shares how one Asian-American family works to meet their needs and wants* * Of the 30 stories in the unit, 4 center non-white characters (including story above), none of which are Black	***Family Reunion*** (Richardson et al., 2021)**:** *This story details the traditions and culture of a Black American family as they prepare to attend/host their Family reunion* • **Representations of Diversity:** Positive Visual Representation of Black Characters • **Positive Language**: Black characters are portrayed as joyful, loving, fun, curious, close knit • **Guidance for Background or Prior Knowledge:** Depicts Black extended family; Celebrates the importance of kinship and intergenerational ties.; Vivid, poetic language and rich illustrations • **Storytelling:** Black author/illustrator
Table 2 (continued)	
Grade 3—Target Question: How can one person change the way you think? **Finding Lincoln*** (Malaspina & Bootman, 2009): *It's 1951, and Louis needs to write an essay, but he is not allowed inside the library. He meets a librarian who gives him access* *Only 1 of 30 stories in unit to center Black characters	**Planting Stories: The Life of Librarian and Storyteller Pura Belpré** (Denise & Escobar, 2019)**:** *See the beautiful adventures of Puerto Rican librarian Pura Belpré as she plants the stories of her homeland* • **Representations of Diversity:** Positive visual representation of Afro-Latina immigrant • **Positive Language**: Pura Belpré is portrayed as intelligent and determined • **Guidance for Engaging Students' Background or Prior Knowledge:** Bilingual text; connects culture/story; includes authors note on Pura Belpré • **Storytelling:** True story of famous Afro-Latina librarian; Diverse author/illustrator

of color were featured, such as in Rain School and Finding Lincoln, stereotypes of Black children were reinforced (e.g., lack of resources/education, experiencing hardships) and both were told through the lens of white authors and illustrators. Finding Lincoln also paints a picture of problems for Black children being solved only through the help of white people, without context around history, agency, or collective action. As indicated in Table 2, the stories we chose, though problematic, are still among very few in each unit that feature Black characters. There are little to no stories that show Black children as joyful, intelligent, caring, or ambitious. In response, we chose alternative picturebooks that directly countered both the culturally destructive patterns we identified in the Wonders stories and serve as a positive alternative or partner text to align with the larger instructional goals of each unit. To do so, we asked questions of the picturebooks - Whose story is being told, and by whom? How are the Black characters and their environment depicted?

Can this story bring students joy? How will this story inspire students? What about this story makes students feel confident and prideful about themselves and their culture? We used our answers to these questions to not only identify what was problematic, but to select picturebooks that worked in opposition to the culturally destructive messaging, and instead included positive representations of diversity and language surrounding Black characters, stories that could be used to engage students' background/prior knowledge, and stories that were not just told from one frame of reference (see Table 2).

It is important to note that we chose these picturebooks as an alternative option for teachers, not as an automatic replacement of the Wonders texts. We acknowledge that replacing potentially problematic stories or stories that deal with "hard histories" is not always the right choice. Young children are often ready to learn about issues such as race and racism. But we have also observed that not all teachers are ready to have these conversations, and we want to ensure that our instruction and curricular materials reflect and support our students' literacy development.

As this case illustrates, Sanchez and Woody's ability to identify what Khan et al. (2022) deemed culturally destructive in the curriculum and, in turn, recommend alternate picturebooks is direct reflection of the support and autonomy they and their colleagues receive from their administrators to be responsive to issues that impact their primarily Black student population. This is critical to acknowledge, particularly during this time when many teachers across the US do not have the freedom to choose representative picturebooks for intentional use in their classrooms. Their ability to do this work, however, is also a direct reflection of their own personal, relational, and pedagogical racial literacy.

To illustrate their racial literacy, we want to highlight one specific example from the case study—their planning and reflection around the text *Finding Lincon* (Malaspina & Boatman, 2009). We first see evidence of their *personal* racial literacy in their ability to *see and understand* the ways race and racism are portrayed in the story and their capacity to *anticipate* how teachers could potentially do harm if they are not prepared for these conversations. Although young children are not "colorblind" (Winkler, 2009), using picturebooks that address issues of race, racism, and the histories of racism that have shaped our nation in developmentally appropriate ways is a complex task and requires teachers to have racial literacy (e.g., Kaczmarczyk et al., 2019). As Sanchez and Woody note, teachers using this text may need to discuss ideas around segregation, advocacy, and allyship, and other potentially problematic patterns (e.g., white saviorism, a lack of agency for characters of color, lack of nuance around historical contexts). Although picturebooks can be critical tools for early educators who are *ready* to have these conversations, not all teachers have the racial literacy to do so. As such, we also see evidence of their *relational* racial literacy in this example. As they noted, exploring these ideas in the 3Rs community of practice has allowed them more opportunities to connect with and support their fellow teachers. As a result, they are *aware* of their colleagues' comfort and readiness to support these conversations and they *acknowledge* that many teachers in their school need more opportunities to learn, grow, and develop racial literacy *together* before having these critical discussions with children. Finally, we see the integration of these personal and relational components demonstrated in their *pedagogical* racial literacy. Based on their ability to *see and anticipate* the potential harm of the story and their *awareness* of teachers' readiness, they took it upon themselves to review and select alternative texts that give both *students and teachers* access to learning goals *and* high quality, racially affirming texts. Taken together, their ability to *see*, *understand*, and *anticipate* culturally destructive patterns, to *know*, *connect* with, and *support* their colleagues, and to *select* picture books that *give access* to culturally destructive counters illuminates their racial literacy and, more importantly, illustrates that they *know* the potential power of picturebooks.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to explore the connections between racial literacy and reading practice, and to highlight the ways the 3Rs Classroom Strand uses picturebooks within communities of practice with early elementary teachers to support this work. This article represents a novel way to use picturebooks within communities of practice to support teachers in developing the racial literacy needed to enact culturally informed pedagogies and deliver effective and equitable reading instruction. Given the critical need for research into instructional approaches that can interrupt the racial opportunity gaps and inequities typical of U.S. schools, this represents an important contribution to the field.

We acknowledge multiple limitations, and the unique contextual variables that make this type of work possible. Our communities of practice and our 3Rs approach are all built upon an ecological model, and within our school-based components, we strive to connect with school leaders and teachers to ensure that 3Rs work is supported across school structures. This approach ensures that teachers know that their leaders are committed to this process, and that they are supported and encouraged to participate, learn, and grow. Many teachers throughout the United

States, and the world, work in contexts where they do not have the freedom to use high quality racially affirming picturebooks (see Pen America, n.d., for a list of picturebooks banned in American schools in 2021–2022) or engage in complex conversations about race. In addition, our communities of practice also take significant time and buy-in from school leaders and teachers themselves, and there are several logistical and scalability challenges related to this work that cannot be downplayed that should be considered in future research. Finally, it is important to note that this work is still preliminary. There remains important theoretical and measurement work to do to understand the associations between the personal, relational, and pedagogical components of racial literacy, to understand their connections to other frameworks for racial literacy, and to develop supports and intervention to measure and therefore support racial literacy development in more targeted ways.

Despite these limitations, our hope is that this work contributes to research exploring the concept of racial literacy and approaches to develop it with teachers. We want to highlight that in our context, the most impactful shifts in teachers' reading practices seem to draw on all three components of racial literacy. This aligns with the multifaceted nature of this construct explored in the literature—personal racial literacy may be foundational, relational racial literacy may be a critical tool for impacting pedagogical and personal literacy in impactful ways, and pedagogical racial literacy may lead to virtuous cycles that reinforce and shift teachers' other components of racial literacy. However, the work herein represents but one way to conceptualize racial literacy and is highly tied to the ways we frame and apply our work to reading instruction. Our purpose is simply to highlight the interconnectedness of these components, particularly when it comes to the role of using picturebooks in communities of practice to support teachers in shifting their racial literacy in ways that lead to more equitable and effective, culturally informed reading practice. Our hope is that naming the examples we have observed with teachers and showing the power of picturebooks to support racial literacy development will lead to additional research into this important topic.

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Declarations

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