

The Case for Racial Literacy

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Abstract

Racial illiteracy is widespread in America, and as adult literacy educators our mission is to address illiteracy in all its manifestations. We teach literacies in reading and writing, numeracy, computer, speaking, listening, visual, health, and media, each vital to making sense of our world and functioning effectively in it. Racial literacy is just as vital and should be taught as well. I argue that racial literacy is critical to a meaningful civic and community life. Some scholars believe it is critical to the perseverance of democracy. At the very least, many adult learners do not possess an understanding of what race is, how it operates in our personal lives and institutions, the history that impacts the present, and how to communicate effectively about it. Whether in writing or speaking about race and racism, many of us lack confidence. As adult literacy professionals it is incumbent upon us to teach racial literacy skills.

Keywords: racial literacy, sociological imagination, race, racism, historical literacy, critical race theory, interruption

Racial illiteracy is widespread in the United States (DiAngelo, 2018), and as adult literacy educators, our mission is to address illiteracy in all its manifestations. We teach literacies in reading, writing, numeracy, computer, speaking, listening, visual, health, and media, each vital to making sense of our world and functioning effectively. Racial literacy is just as vital and should be taught as well. Racial literacy is critical to a meaningful civic and community life, and some scholars believe it is critical to the perseverance of democracy (West, 2004). At the very least, many adult learners and adult literacy educators do not possess an understanding of what race is, how it operates in our personal lives and institutions, the history that impacts the present, and how to communicate effectively about it. Notwithstanding, I do recognize the profound experiential knowledge of so many students of color when it comes to both individual and institutional racism.

In general adult Americans writing or speaking about race and racism demonstrate either resistance or ignorance. This is evidenced by polarized and volatile communication on social media, avoidance of the topic in personal conversation, ongoing and renewed efforts to suppress America's racial history (attacks on critical race theory [CRT]), banning of books on race, and the erasure of

critical American history including 200 years of slavery (rejection of the 1619 Project); these are a few overt examples of racial illiteracy (Schwartz-Chaney, 2024). The goal of this paper is to define racial literacy in the context of adult education, suggest a model and theory that support racial literacy, and make the case that as adult literacy professionals it is incumbent upon us to develop racial literacy skills and teach them to our students.

Defining Racial Literacy

The National Council of Teachers of English defines racial literacy as "the ability to read, discuss, and write about situations that involve race and racism" (Sealy-Ruiz, 2021, p. 2). Race scholars define it as practices and skill in interrogating the effects of systemic racism on personal experiences and societal representations (Rogers & Mosley, 2006; Skerrett, 2011).

In addition, being racially literate is the ability to comprehend how America's unique history impacts current events or phenomena like the killing of George Floyd and Trayvon Martin, affirmative action, poverty, mass incarceration, and disparities in health care during COVID. Racial literacy engages the sociological imagination

(Mills, 1959) placing personal experiences within larger social and historical contexts. A well-developed sociological imagination makes one aware of the working of history within one's present condition. Examples are how an individual's White privilege, educational or health care options, or odds of being incarcerated are connected to racial history.

The ability to discuss hard issues like the banning of books, CRT, and our own racial biases without defensiveness of behavior and polarization of thinking demonstrates racial literacy. It includes skills of civil discourse, whether face-to-face or online. Adults who are racially literate are able to define race as a social construct. They understand that science supports race as a social construct rather than a biological one (National Human Genome Research Institute, 2024). Racial literacy encompasses the comprehension that race is not scientifically identifiable so therefore not "real", while at the same time recognizing that it is "real" as it operates within society and institutions through racism (Dyson, 2021). Being racially literate includes understanding intersectionality and that race operates in conjunction with gender, class, caste, religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and colorism (Crenshaw, 1989). Race and ethnicity intersect but are different. Race is a social construction primarily based on physical features, skin color, and hair texture. Ethnicity includes language, national origin, traditions, and ancestry. Racial literacy encompasses an understanding and sensitivity to all marginalized communities, while recognizing the United States' unique relationship with race.

Racial literacy is different yet shares similarities with anti-racist pedagogy, cultural literacy, and democratic education. With anti-racist pedagogy, it shares the tenets of improving vocabulary (bias, discrimination, institutional racism, etc.) and developing self-awareness (reflexivity—a core component of adult education) (Brookfield, 2014). Cultural literacy is broader than racial literacy, acknowledging the intersectionality of culture, ethnicity, and gender, rather than a narrower focus on race. Being racially literate could result from democratic education where students manage their own learning and participate in governance but, while not necessarily. Racial literacy is a skill that enables one to read, write, converse, and act with an awareness and understanding of race and racism (Bowman et al., 2014). To be clear, to be clear, people are not merely racially literate or illiterate but like other

literacies are on a continuum of literacy development (Chavez-Moreno, 2022).

Racial literacy like media literacy examines author or speaker positionality, bias, propaganda, and social context. Central to the U.S. experience is racism; therefore, the history of race is central. The United States is quickly becoming more racially and ethnically diverse, and adult learners need the information and skills to communicate civilly within these changing communities. For immigrant students, racial literacy instruction from a U.S. historical perspective is required. Students' lived experience around race in other countries may differ from what they encounter in the United States. Although racism is a global phenomenon, the United States has its unique legacy in part because of 258 years of slavery on its land and its continued manifestation in its institutions (Crenshaw, 2011).

Race and Adult Education

Adult educators have long engaged and spoken to racial justice and literacy. Juanita Johnson-Bailey's extensive work is at the intersection of gender, race and adult education with a particular emphasis on Black women in graduate school; Talmadge Guy's work on Black men in adult education and culturally relevant pedagogy is most notable; Lisa Merriweather as one of the founding editors of *Dialogues in Social Justice* has focused on the intersection of race, social justice and adult education while in her own research examines diversity and mentoring in higher education. CRT and experiences of White students in predominantly Black universities has been the focus of Rosemary Closson's research. Dianne Ramdeholl's early work was in adult literacy and democratic spaces; her more recent work is with decentering the academy, looking at diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education. Edith Gnanadass has published much on race and South Asian students with an emphasis on family literacy and women. These adult education scholars and more have contributed to the wider field of adult education in which adult literacy is a crucial component and contributed to the discussion of race in the field to which we are all indebted. With this said, the focus of this paper is adult literacy educators and racial literacy within this larger context of adult education.

One Model for Developing Racial Literacy

How does one become racially literate? One instructional design is the Racial Literacy Development Model theorized by Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz (<https://www.yolandasealeyruiz.com/>). This model includes three tenets and six steps to racial fluency. Sealey-Ruiz's work is with teacher education, and she believes that before engaging students, educators must perform "the archaeology of the self"—the deep work of excavating how race and racist ideas impact their own lives and behavior. Especially for White educators, this self-examination of their encounters with race, White supremacy, White privilege, and interest convergence must be unearthed in order not to further traumatize students (Sealey-Ruiz, 2020). While the terms White privilege and supremacy may be familiar, interest convergence is the concept that Whites engage in work for social change when the change aligns with benefit to themselves (Bell, 1980).

Sealey-Ruiz's (2021) three tenets of racial literacy development are to question assumptions, dialogue critically, and practice reflexivity. Based on these tenets, Sealey-Ruiz outlines six development steps: interruption, archeology of self, historical literacy, critical reflection, critical humility, and critical love. These steps echo Paulo Freire's praxis, Brookfield's critically reflective practice (1998), and adult transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991). Sealey-Ruiz's participatory education style—learner-centered, open questioning, learning by doing, small-groups, writing-intensive, and critical reflection—is well suited to adult learners in all settings and reflects the work that adult educators already do but not necessarily race-focused.

Interruption and Historical Literacy

While all six steps of this model are useful, two steps are crucial in the climate of banning books on race, resisting critical race theory (CRT), and challenging diversity, equity and inclusion practice (DEI). The two steps are interruption and historical literacy. Except for people of color and anti-racist scholars who are committed to the role of adult literacy and historical race research, many adult literacy educators lack these two skill sets (Ramdeholl, 2023).

Interruption is one's intellectual and spiritual commitment to embrace racial literacy and an anti-

racist stance to combat inequality at personal and systemic levels. It includes understanding the impact of institutionalized racism upon students of color who often attended segregated, under-funded and poorly resourced schools where their physical and emotional safety was compromised. Beyond educational disparities, educators need to do the deep work that recognizes that institutional racism in the form of substandard healthcare, poverty, and over-policing may have impacted our students of color's ability to secure a sound education. Interruption is the intentionality and commitment to disrupt the status quo by examining our prejudices and assumptions and by studying our collective racism. White people need to admit to white privilege and that societal White supremacy impacts values, beliefs, and interactions with students. For educators of color, colorism, ethnicity and parental upbringing may have impacted values, beliefs, and expectations of students and should be examined.

Through the writing of our life stories as they engage race; journaling about experiences of racism, engaging in critical conversations with others with divergent life experiences; listening to others' racial pain; telling our advocacy stories; exploring how each of us came to recognize race; and identifying our racial identity, both educators and students become racially aware. This is a method of using writing and conversations in ways that matter and have potential to heal. This is a way toward interruption. Brookfield (2014) speaks of how Instructors often incorporate their own personal narratives of Whiteness into anti-racist practice and how they need to interrupt this pattern of ingrained racism through brave dialogue across difference. Of course, this kind of writing and conversation comes with risk. There is risk of further harm. Healing is not easy. That is why the next stage of Sealey-Ruiz's (2021) model is so crucial. It is the concept that engages the sociological imagination mentioned earlier, moving beyond the personal narrative and personal experiences of race and connecting them to a larger social, historical context. This is a metacognitive process that gives one the self-awareness to see race not only from the micro-personal but also from the macro-social and historical lens. This objectifies our own feelings, giving us a larger perspective on race in the United States and decreasing the likelihood that individuals will be further harmed.

CRT as a Tool to Develop Historical Literacy

Historical literacy is deep knowledge of historical facts and forces that shape communities and society (Sealey-Ruiz, 2021). One strong theory that supports historical literacy development is CRT; its application in adult education has been promoted in the literature (Closson, 2010) while being one of the most contentious and misunderstood legal, social science, and education theories of our day. Near hysteria has erupted in the media, legislatures, and in community and school boards around CRT. Faulty arguments demonizing CRT claim that White children will feel guilt for racism and that Black children will be victimized (Schwartz-Chaney, 2024). Opponents assert that CRT is a rewriting of American history and is anti-democratic. These are erroneous arguments fueled in large measure by fear and racial illiteracy. In brief, CRT is predominantly an American theoretical framework on how race and racism systematically and institutionally operate in legislation, criminal justice, education, healthcare, housing, etc., explaining the prevalence of racism and the benefit to Whites of racism (interest convergence); the value of storytelling from the marginalized (counternarratives); and its intersection with gender, class and sexual orientation (intersectionality) (Delgado et al., 2017). For adult literacy educators, CRT can be an effective tool for conceptualizing how race functions in the United States and developing racial literacy for themselves and their students.

Derrick Bell, a law professor at Harvard and New York University School of Law, is considered the originator of CRT (Cobb, 2021). Bell used participatory methods in his law school classrooms encouraging students to examine their own assumptions, interrupt racism, and become anti-racist (Schwartz-Chaney, 2024). Current assaults on CRT are not only attacks on academic freedom but also work to eliminate opportunities for all learners to understand how race is shaping America's past and present. CRT frames conversations on racism from a systemic, institutional, and historic lens, opening opportunities for overdue, intelligent, and civil discussions about race and its impact on everyone. CRT could be introduced to literacy educators and students, then combined with the Racial Development Literacy Model with its steps of interruption and historical literacy; we do not need to "reinvent the wheel."

Banned Books, Sociological Imagination, and Racial Literacy

Reading books and works by writers that interrupt racism and support historical literacy is crucial to racial literacy. Unfortunately, many are banned in some school districts, especially in the South (Pen America, 2023). They include books like *The 1619 Project* by Nikole Hannah-Jones, *Stamped from the Beginning* by Ibram Kendi, *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas, and *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontent* by Isabel Wilkerson. These books challenge White traditional narratives and tell the complicated history that include enslaving of Africans and genocide of Native Americans; the Reconstruction era and the emergence of Jim Crow; the Civil Rights Movement; mass incarceration; the re-emergence of Asian-American racism during COVID; and the Black Lives Matter movement. Racial literacy includes an understanding of why certain books are banned and an understanding of academic freedom. Black authors are racial literacy guides—W.E.B. Dubois, bell hooks, Malcolm X, Howard Stevenson, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Thurgood Marshall, Cornel West, Ibram Kendi, Nikole Hannah-Jones, and Isabel Wilkerson, just to name a few.

These books and authors can guide learners in navigating the divided America in which we now live, both philosophically and physically. The United States is now more segregated than at the time of Brown vs. Board of Education, and the backlash against racial progress after our first Black president is palatable (Wedderburn, 2023). Literacy educators and learners need to be able to define race and racism, understand America's racial history, and be equipped to engage in civil discourse that embraces their own stories within larger historical narratives connecting the racialized past with the present sociological imagination.

Finally, discussing censorship and the banning of books; addressing misinformation and identifying fallacy; critically reflecting on racism within their own lives and communities; acquiring a working knowledge of CRT with a commitment to interrupt past patterns of thinking and knowing all are skills of racial literacy. It is incumbent upon adult literary educators, first for themselves and then for their students, to interrupt racism by deliberately and concertedly teaching racial literacy skills in response to the conflicted and polarized climate that presently exists within the United States.

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