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Addressing Equity and Anti-Racism in a Reading Specialist Program

Sophie Degener, Tina Curry, Mary Hoch, Gloria McDaniel-Hall, Ruth Quiroa, and Courtney Brookins

Purpose

Reading instruction in the U.S., particularly literacy instruction for our racially and linguistically marginalized students, is an oft-discussed and debated issue, with some researchers and educators insisting that reading difficulties in this country are due to a lack of focus on what they call the “science of reading” (e.g., Moats, 2017; Seidenberg, 2017) while others (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 1995; Morrell, 2017; Muhammad, 2020) look through a critical race and critical literacy lens, noting that reading instruction tends to reflect an understanding of literacy that is very much caught up in white privilege and racism. While we acknowledge both understandings of the “literacy gap” in this country, it is the latter perspective we address in this study.

The reading specialist program at our private, midwestern university has long served predominantly white, female candidates with 76% reporting as such in 2017. Given the many inquiries of local P-12 schools seeking BIPOC and bilingual/biliterate graduates, we have worked to increase the representation of minoritized and bilingual candidates enrolled in our program. However, while the numbers of BIPOC candidates have increased by 15% since 2017, we recognize that our program has not adequately addressed issues of linguistic and racial diversity. Our candidates are increasingly willing to speak out about our program’s deficiencies around (bi)literacy for Black and Brown students. We are grateful they feel empowered to share their perceptions and agree that there is much to be done to make the program meaningful to candidates and to benefit the racially and linguistically diverse school-age children in their schools. Thus, this study examines our reading specialist program to a) understand how its faculty, processes, content, pedagogies, and assessments perpetuate oppressive perspectives and approaches to reading instruction, assessment, and intervention, and b) to begin to change this situation.

Theoretical Framework

As educators and researchers, we hold to Mertens’ (2015) Transformative Paradigm with its focus on the lives and experiences of individuals and groups traditionally marginalized in educational systems, including postgraduate programs. Its philosophical framework “explicitly addresses issues of power and justice” (Mertens, 2015, p. 25), something we seek to attend to by consciously positioning ourselves alongside those who may be less powerful in a “joint effort to bring about social transformation” (p. 21). We also hold that racism is deeply embedded within our society (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 1998) and educational institutions. As such, we have been critical of national and state policies that tend toward behavioristic beliefs and high stakes testing practices designed to benefit white, abled students. We realize that this stance is insufficient given that generations of BIPOC children have experienced the violence of first language loss (Martínez, 2017), the school-to-prison pipeline (Sealey-Ruiz, 2011), and limited opportunities for postsecondary education and upward mobility (Love, 2019).

Critical Race Theory (Crenshaw, et al., 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 1998) influences all aspects of this study. As such, we recognize that we hold and maintain spaces of power and privilege, and that racism has and continues to be woven throughout our lives in subtle and explicit ways, impacting our identities and perspectives as educators. To decolonize our program (e.g., Enciso, 2019), we seek to collaboratively locate “power in social practices by understanding, uncovering, and transforming conditions of inequity” (Rogers, as cited by Short, 2017, p. 4), while working alongside BIPOC colleagues, students, and alumni, to counter inherited and perpetuated oppressive worldviews and practices embedded within our program.

Finally, our study is also informed by Strayhorn’s (2012) notion of *belonging*. According to Strayhorn, while academic preparedness and background are factors in students’ satisfaction and persistence in higher ed settings, a sense of belonging, as measured by students’ perception of support from their professors, university staff, and fellow students, is also critically important, particularly for BIPOC students.

Review of Relevant Literature

For decades, researchers have explored literacy through a critical lens, promoting the notion that literacy learning must be relevant in the out-of-school lives of our students of color, and even liberatory (e.g., Ball, 2009; Freire, 1970; Gutierrez, 2008; Lee, 2008), often noting the mismatch in backgrounds and cultures of teachers and the students they work with (e.g., Delpit, 2006; Flowers, 2016).

In her book, *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy*, Muhammad (2020) encourages literacy instruction that goes beyond skills, embracing student identity, intellect, criticality and brilliance. She clearly states, “We must stop implementing curriculum and literacy models that were not designed for or by people of color, expecting that these models will advance the educational achievement of children of color” (p. 60).

Ernest Morrell (2017) writes that there are three imperatives that should guide literacy research, policy and practice, namely, demographic, moral, and economic. It is his description of the moral imperative that we take up as our call to action:

We have an ethical and moral imperative to ensure that every student receives a humanizing, impactful literacy education. We also have a moral imperative that every student’s literacy education increases his or her capacity for intercultural understanding. This approach is not intended for “historically marginalized” populations only. We need to think differently (and more boldly) about the literacy education that every child receives. How does a reimagined literacy education help every child to understand the world and his or her place within it? How do we encourage multiliteracies, multilingualism, and translanguaging practices in our classrooms and schools? And how do we hold ourselves accountable for developing

literacy curricula and literacy policies that produce more engaged and empathic global citizens (p. 456)?

While we clearly want to provide a program that meets the needs of our BIPOC candidates, it is also key, as Morrell notes, that *all of our candidates*, including the white candidates, are encouraged to think differently and more boldly about literacy learning. Kinloch, Burkhard, and Penn (2020) discuss the racism that people of color face in our country, and they believe there is a life-or-death urgency in providing literacy instruction that moves our schools and our country toward justice. They envision literacy teachers who can provide “critical, activist-oriented spaces, in schools and in communities, where students are supported to create, reimagine, and produce literacy narratives grounded in justice, and where they are also encouraged to interrogate inequities and inequalities that limit freedom” (p. 5).

While the goal of revising our program to better reflect anti-racist literacy practices is an important one, it is notable that previous research related to this goal has been uneven. For example, studies that examined the capacity of white teachers to enact culturally responsive pedagogy revealed teachers that struggled to build relationships with their Black students (Hyland, 2009), teachers that continued to view their BIPOC students with a deficit lens (Santoro & Allard, 2005), and teachers whose conception of caring was static and didn’t match students’ lives (James, 2012). We are encouraged by the recent work of Black scholars, such as Croom (2020) and Sealey-Ruiz (2011), who provide clear guidelines on building racial literacy, especially with white teachers, to overcome this disconnect.

We are proud of the work we do in the reading program. We believe that the courses we teach enable the majority of our candidates to become excellent teachers of literacy with measurable benefits for the students they work with. However, we also know that, in general, our program has historically represented a view of literacy that is limited and which views students with literacy needs as deficient and in need of “fixing.” It also largely ignores the various languages and literacy practices that children bring to school, focusing instead on specific practices that reflect a mainstream view of literacy that sees difference as deficit. With this study, we sought to build on an already established and successful program, so as to better reflect the diversity in our schools and to better meet the needs of all students growing up in a diverse and pluralistic society.

Methods

This research employed a descriptive case study approach to understanding a bounded unit—our reading specialist program (Stake, 2000) and its multiple stakeholders. It was also informed by precepts of collaborative self-study, as this methodology allowed us to work together to systematically and collaboratively study problems of practice more deeply (Dinkleman, 2003) in order to make meaningful change (Loughran, 2005).

The research questions that guided our study were:

1. In what ways does our program (and the courses within it) currently highlight or uphold oppressive literacy practices and in what ways does it highlight or uphold anti-bias/anti-racist literacy practices?
2. What changes can we make to our program/courses that will deliberately embed course elements, including readings, videos, and assignments, that reflect an equity-focused, culturally sustaining approach to literacy instruction?
 - a. What immediate changes can be implemented?
 - b. What long-range, sustainable, and socially and racially just changes can be mapped out?
 - c. What can we identify from our study that is most influential in moving us toward these changes?

Participants:

The participants include all reading specialist program stakeholders (See Table 1 for a breakdown by race/ethnicity and gender.)

- Primary research team (n=6)
- Current reading program candidates (n=33)
- Reading program alumni (n=15)
- Adjunct literacy instructors (n=6)
- External partners: Area principals, literacy leaders (n=5)

Data Sources

Research Team Meeting Transcripts: Our self-study included monthly meetings dedicated to studying our program, including ourselves as instructors in the program. In our meetings, we interrogated our course syllabi, assignments, readings, and our program learning outcomes and philosophy. We assigned scholarly readings and other materials designed to push our own understanding forward, and we also used our meeting time to trouble-shoot our teaching and to brainstorm solutions to issues raised by students and alumni. We transcribed recordings of our meetings.

Faculty Reflective Journals: Each month, we wrote personal reflections which we shared with each other prior to our meetings.

Program Artifacts: We maintained an archive of program course syllabi, readings and other digital materials, and assignments, both as they existed prior to our study and the revised documents that reflect our evolving understanding of anti-bias/anti-racist teaching. In addition, we created a library of new articles, videos, and other sources that guided our learning over the course of the study.

Student Feedback: We sought input from our current students in the form of an anonymous survey that asked students what they had learned about anti-bias/anti-racist literacy curriculum, instruction, and assessment as it pertained to our various courses, what they would have liked to learn, and where they believe the gaps to be (across and within courses). We invited students to participate in a voluntary focus group (or interview) to follow-up on survey responses.

Alumni Feedback: Alumni who graduated within the past two years were surveyed anonymously to find out what they learned about anti-bias/anti-racist literacy curriculum, instruction and assessment while in our program, what they would have liked to learn, and where they believe the gaps were (across and within courses). We also interviewed willing alumni in order to seek elaborated answers to the questions asked on the survey.

Adjunct Instructor Feedback: We conducted interviews and focus groups with adjuncts who teach in our reading program to determine how their courses reflect equitable and anti-racist literacy instruction and to hear about their successes and struggles with this work.

External Stakeholder Feedback. We interviewed principals and literacy leaders in schools and districts to better find out what understanding of anti-racist literacy practices they are seeking in the reading teachers/specialists they hire.

Data Analysis

Data collection and analysis was an ongoing and iterative process, utilizing constant comparative techniques (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) and content analysis (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

To answer our first question, we used simple statistics to analyze multiple choice and Likert-scale items from the student and alumni surveys. We coded open-ended survey questions using a priori codes (Saldaña, 2015). Using constant comparative analysis, we then coded each interview and focus group transcription, revising or adding codes as the data indicated. Finally, we examined the data holistically, identifying themes that best addressed our question. To answer our third research question, we followed a similar process with our research meeting notes and transcripts as well as journal reflections, though with different a priori codes.

To address our second research question, we borrowed from the field of multicultural children's literature, employing critical reading and multicultural content analysis (Botelho & Rudman, 2009; Short, 2017) of course and program-related artifacts. For example, we began by reviewing required course readings for a) authorship (white, BIPOC), b) author perspective, c) study participants, d) intended readers (white as default, monolingual, bilingual), and e) intended recipients of pedagogical and assessment practices. This, together with student/alumni surveys and interview/focus group data from all participants led to further discussions, reflection, research, and reading to identify ways to decolonize these materials.

Results

The majority of current students and alumni (94% each) report that it is important or very important that our program intentionally address issues of equity and anti-racism in our courses. Respondents noted that Youth Literature and the Seminar in Reading Research were more consistently and intentionally focused on equity and anti-racism while the Beginning Literacy and Comprehension courses were not.

White students and alumni were far more likely to say that the program is adequately addressing equity and anti-racism than BIPOC students. In focus groups, BIPOC alumni noted feeling marginalized in many classes and underprepared to teach Black and emergent bilingual students. Many alumni and students mentioned the lack of diversity in our faculty and suggested hiring more faculty of color or bringing in BIPOC guest speakers. BIPOC students were clear that they felt relief and a greater sense of belonging when they had BIPOC instructors. One theme that emerged from interviews with several BIPOC students was their feeling (or lack of feeling) that they belonged. Some noted feeling a sense of insignificance in every class, like their views, knowledge, and experiences didn't matter.

Students and alumni had key insights about how our program could better address equity and anti-racism. Many noted the importance of embedding equity-related work across courses/curriculum. They suggested that program faculty be explicit about why we're using anti-racist materials and how it connects and is relevant to our students' own teaching. They pointed out that students at the beginning of their equity journey may need scaffolding and guidance to support their growth.

Similarly, adjunct instructors revealed in interviews and focus groups that they are at different stages in their equity journey. While they all believe that addressing equity and anti-racism in our program is important, many feel that they haven't done this sufficiently and need to build their capacity for the work. Most instructors noted that white students often push back on their efforts to address equity, and they would like to know better how to address that pushback. They see the ability to collaborate with each other and with full-time faculty as key.

Interviews with principals and literacy leaders showed a diversity of perspectives on the importance of equity. Most do think it's important to hire reading specialists who are well-versed in equity and anti-racism as it applies to literacy instruction, but some had a difficult time defining what anti-racist literacy instruction entails and definitions varied widely. In interviews, many do not explicitly ask teacher candidates about how they address equity in their literacy instruction and assessment—some say they rely on instinct and a “gut feeling” about teachers' beliefs. Only one school leader, a superintendent of a suburban school district, indicated that equitable instruction (in all subjects) was a top priority across schools, including in the hiring process, curriculum/materials selection, and teacher evaluation.

As a result of our study, we have made multiple changes to each of our courses, including diversifying the readings, modifying assignments, and shifting the focus of our class discussions. In each class, we offer multiple opportunities for our students to reflect on their own identities, and considering how their experiences as readers/writers influence their teaching and interactions with students and families. Classes have been rewritten and reconfigured to ensure that minoritized students are considered across class sessions and not relegated to one or two class sessions at the end of the term. We have even added two classes (historical and theoretical foundations of literacy in the U.S.) that explore how literacy has been used to oppress linguistically and racially marginalized populations in our country.

Changing course descriptions, learning outcomes, readings and assignments to better reflect BIPOC authors, researchers, and P-12 students has been the easiest aspect of this work. Acknowledging how our own pedagogy perpetuates inequitable systems and white-centered beliefs has challenged us. The self-study aspects, together with space to collaborate and challenge one another were essential, with our research team acknowledging the importance of monthly readings and discussions for furthering growth and learning while we simultaneously processed the feedback from students, alumni, adjuncts, and external partners.

Conclusion

Programs designed to prepare teachers must consider how their program philosophy, learning outcomes, readings, assignments, and pedagogy do or do not uphold oppressive, white-centered practices. Our study provides teacher preparation and literacy faculty with ideas for tackling this issue. Our graduates work with P-12 students in spaces where their knowledge (or lack thereof) about equitable, BIPOC-centered approaches to assessment, curriculum, and instruction will impact their students' learning for many years.

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Table 1: Study Participants

Study Participants	Racial/ethnic identification	Gender
Primary Research Team (n=6)	Black: 2 White: 4	Female: 5 Male: 1
Student participants, survey (n=33)	Black: 3 Latinx: 3 Asian: 1 White: 23 Other race, unspecified: 2	Did not ask on survey as we have so few male students that we worried we could not guarantee anonymity.
Student participants, interviews/focus groups (n=2)	Black: 1 Latinx: 1	Female: 1 Male: 1
Alumni participants, survey (n=15)	Black: 4 Latinx: 2 White: 7 Middle Eastern: 1 Preferred not to say: 1	Did not ask on survey, again because we have so few male graduates that we could not guarantee anonymity.
Alumni participants, interviews/focus groups (n=4)	Black: 2 Latinx: 1 White: 1	Female: 3 Male: 1
Adjunct participants (n=4)	Latinx: 1 White: 5	Female: 6
External partners (n=5)	Black: 1 Latinx: 2 White: 2	Female: 2 Male: 3