

# Using a Book-Club Model to Support Racial Literacy Development among Teachers of Multilingual Learners

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*New teachers need time, support, mentorship, and experience to build racial literacies that will transform teaching. In response, this article explores the potential of book-club–style professional development to promote racial literacy among “mainstream” teachers of multilingual learners. In presenting a qualitative inquiry of participants in an international, intergenerational, action-oriented racial literacy book club for teachers of multilingual students, we share three findings regarding how the book club functioned to support new teacher participants to grow their racial literacy and antiracist awareness for addressing injustices in their various spheres of influence: (1) the book club created an extended learning environment for new teachers to grow their racial literacy in tandem with their developing classroom practice; (2) it fostered understanding among participants living and teaching in different parts of North America regarding the ways in which issues of race and language were both common across contexts and locally inflected; and (3) it supported the development of mentoring relationships. We conclude with a discussion of implications for the broader use of book clubs as part of socially conscious teacher education and professional development.*

*Les nouveaux enseignants ont besoin de temps, de soutien, de mentorat et d'expérience pour développer des littératies raciales qui transformeront l'enseignement. En réponse, cet article explore le potentiel du développement professionnel sous forme de cercles de lecture pour promouvoir la littératie raciale parmi les enseignants de classes « régulières » composées d'apprenants multilingues. En présentant une recherche qualitative sur les participants d'un cercle de lecture international, intergénérationnel et orienté vers l'action pour les enseignants d'élèves multilingues, nous partageons trois conclusions concernant la manière dont le cercle de lecture a aidé les nouveaux enseignants participants à développer leur littératie raciale et leur conscience antiraciste pour lutter contre les injustices dans leurs diverses sphères d'influence : (1) Le cercle de lecture a créé un environnement d'apprentissage élargi pour les nouveaux enseignants afin qu'ils puissent développer leurs littératies raciales en même temps que leur pratique pédagogique; (2) il a favorisé la compréhension entre les participants vivant et enseignant dans différentes parties de l'Amérique du Nord concernant la façon dont les enjeux de race et de langue étaient à la fois communs à tous les contextes et déclinés localement; et (3) il a favorisé le développement de relations de mentorat. Nous concluons par une discussion des implications*

*d'une utilisation plus large des cercles de lecture dans le cadre d'une formation des enseignants et d'un développement professionnel socialement conscients.*

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*Keywords:* K–12 teacher professional development, multilingual learners, racial literacy

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*Daliba is a 14-year-old male student from Malawi attending Amherst Heights Regional High School, where he often finds himself debunking his classmates' preconceived notions of Africa: "I told them that what you see in the news is not everything." When asked his feelings about immigrating, he recalled how excited he was about coming to the United States, aware of the many prospects and opportunities that lay ahead. However, there was one thing that made him anxious and very nervous—the plight of the young Black man in America. Having seen television news coverage of US police shootings, he worried about his survival in the United States, his identity, and how he would be perceived by others, particularly law enforcement. Daliba had an unconscious awareness that his racial identity would be one of the biggest challenges he would endure as an immigrant. He had heard of young Black men like Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and numerous others who had lost their lives at the hands of police. He feared for his life, recalling the feeling that "I am so afraid I will be next."*

*-- Notes from an interview with "Daliba," a multilingual high-school student*

*There is so much I do not know about racial issues. In my program, we didn't discuss that much, but maybe we just didn't have time with all the licensure stuff. In book club, I am being introduced to new terminology that I was not aware of before and thinking about my English learners and their experiences in new ways. I'm glad I joined because sadly, I don't think I have any idea of the depth and severity of racism, but I am really impacted by the importance and significance of not remaining silent.*

*-- "Ms. Oberman," first-year English as an additional language teacher*

This pair of quotes—from interviews with a multilingual child and a first-year English language teacher working with multilingual children—calls attention to the racialized experiences of many multilingual learners in North America and teachers' relative lack of preparation for attending to such intersectional experiences in thought and practice. In response, as co-authors who have worked extensively with multilingual children like Daliba and who now teach mandatory courses about supporting multilingual learners in generalist teacher education programs like the one Ms. Oberman completed, we begin this article by defining racial literacy and sharing four observations that motivate the need for further development of racial literacy in North American (language) teacher education.

*Racial literacy* is a term first coined by sociologist France Winddance Twine (2004) to categorize practices that white mothers of biracial children in the United Kingdom used to teach and raise racial awareness, as well as to help their children understand, embrace, and develop a positive Black identity. Twine observed that racially literate white parents made the conscious choice to learn more about their child's other race and culture(s) to help create a more balanced appreciation of the two heritages for their biracial children. The term has since been applied more broadly, including in educational contexts. Following Howard (2020), we define teacher racial literacy in this article as "knowledge, skills, awareness and dispositions to talk about race and racism." This definition encompasses and brings to the fore critical questions about how educators think about race, how we talk about race with colleagues, and how we engage in discussions around race with minoritized students. To be racially literate in today's world entails having the ability to recognize the racial and intersectional challenges encountered by minoritized people,

find ways to respond to these challenges, and counter the role that racism plays in education and broader society.

Four observations led us to the exploration of racial literacy for teachers of multilingual learners presented in this article. First, we observe the trend toward more racially and linguistically diverse K–12 classrooms in North America over the last decade (NCES, 2020a; Statistics Canada, 2021). One marker of this trend is the increasing number of students designated as “English learners,” one of the fastest-growing student populations composed primarily of students of colour (Mitchell, 2013; NCES, 2024). However, while student demographics are shifting, most of the teaching force still identifies as white, monocultural, and monolingual (NCES, 2020b; Ryan et al., 2009). There remains a huge disparity between the racialized, linguistic, and cultural experiences of the teaching force and those of the increasingly diverse student population. A troubling aspect of this trend is the growing number of accounts of the ways in which many multilingual students are doubly stigmatized as they are held up against intertwined racial and linguistic standards in ways that result in education inequities (Mitchell, 2013). These disparities point to a need for future teachers to better understand and be equipped to respond to diverse students’ racially inflected lived experiences (Sealey-Ruiz, 2021).

Second, we observe that while many language teachers think of themselves as open-minded people working in a “nice” field (Kubota, 2002), recent data from Starck and colleagues (2020) show that teachers’ bias levels match those of the general public. Their study compares implicit and explicit racial biases in 69,000 US K–12 teachers and 1.5 million adults in the general public, ultimately showing that “both teachers and non-teachers hold pro-white explicit and implicit racial biases” (p. 273) and that “the bias levels are comparable” (p. 281). These findings challenge the assumption that language teachers have less bias or know how to challenge the ways in which bias shows up in everyday talk because they are in a well-intentioned profession (Accurso et al., 2019; Kubota & Lin, 2006).

Third, we observe that North American systems of schooling are “color-evasive” (Annamma et al., 2017), reflecting a society that thinks racially—implicitly *and* explicitly—but hates to do so. Colour-evasiveness is a type of non-recognition that manifests in individual claims not to see race, as well as in more systematic failures to mention race or racism in generalist education and language education policy, research, or practice. For example, in the context of generalist teacher education, Gordon (2005) documented how teacher educators struggle to create discourse around race with teachers in training. In the context of language education, Von Esch and colleagues (2020) describe an eerie absence of race in language-teaching literature until recently. Additionally, research reveals that some teacher candidates neither know, nor want to know, about racial issues or racism (Galman et al., 2010; Garrett & Segall, 2013; Leonardo, 2009; McDonough, 2009). Many teacher candidates have viewed students’ racialized and linguistic backgrounds as a problem, rather than as deep sources of knowledge and resources for learning (Delpit, 2006). In turn, then, perhaps it is not surprising that new teachers “often resist mentioning the very racial patterns they seem most trained to reproduce” (Pollock, 2004, p. 171).

Fourth and finally, we observe that as teacher education programs get shorter and shorter, new teachers rarely have enough time or support to think deeply about how race and racism influence language teaching and learning (Gerald, 2020). Over a decade ago, education activist Christine Sleeter (2008) warned that neoliberal pressures on teacher education would simultaneously push toward shortening university-based teacher education and away from explicit equity-oriented teacher preparation (see also Nygreen et al., 2015). The new teacher quote from Ms. Oberman at the beginning of this article suggests this was an apt warning. Moreover, as a team of authors who are also teacher educators, we anecdotally note that we have each encountered a growing desire for greater attention to racial literacy among teacher candidates in our courses about multilingual learners, but not always strong support from administration to build coursework or professional development in this area, perhaps owing to the same neoliberal pressures. In addition, we observe that sometimes, teacher candidates’ lack of classroom experience can limit the connections they make between theory and antiracist practice.

New teachers need time, support, mentorship, and experience to build racial literacies that will transform teaching, and one way to create these conditions is via the implementation of book clubs (Wetzel & Rogers, 2015). Book clubs are gatherings around shared texts; they allow for interaction, the formation of interpersonal bonds, collaborative knowledge construction, and the development of new literacies through dialogue and conversation (Burbank et al., 2010; Porath, 2018). These benefits have been shown to extend also to K–12 teachers preparing to work with multilingual learners (e.g., Andrei et al., 2010), though we were not able to find any existing literature focused specifically on book clubs for developing racial literacy for new teachers of multilingual learners.

In this article, we present a qualitative inquiry of new teachers' participation in a book club that centred on issues of race, education, and language. Qualitative research seeks to explore and understand phenomena through the exploration of human perspectives and individual or group meaning-making (Creswell, 2014; Denzin et al., 2023). This qualitative study is consequently designed to analyze and describe learning experiences among a group of individuals, specifically new teachers. Following a description of how the book club was established and structured as a form of sustained professional development for teachers working in multilingual contexts, we explore this question: How did the book club, as an approach to professional development, support the racial literacy development of new teacher members? We present three vignettes that illustrate how the book club supported new teachers in growing their racial literacy and antiracist awareness for addressing injustices in their various spheres of influence. Findings demonstrate how the book club created an extended learning environment for new teachers to grow their racial literacy in tandem with their developing classroom practice, fostered understanding among participants living and teaching in different parts of North America regarding the ways in which issues of race and language were both common across contexts and locally inflected, and supported the development of mentoring relationships. Based on these findings, we argue that action-oriented racial literacy book clubs for teachers of multilingual learners are one viable way to respond to the issues outlined above.

## **New Teachers' Professional Development in the Race, Education, and Language Book Club**

### *Book Club Origins*

The Race, Education, and Language Book Club, or REAL Talk, was first conceptualized in 2019 by co-authors Kathryn Accurso and Brenda Muzeta as an action-oriented form of sustained professional development in response to the observations outlined in the previous section. We chose race, education, and language as areas of focus because they represent a nexus of issues that teachers must continue to discuss after they graduate and enter the field if they are to develop what Freire (1996) called a "critical praxis." We intended to create an international, intergenerational book club—an equitable and diverse space where every voice would be honoured and respected—by inviting new and experienced teachers from schools across Canada and the United States to meet online every three months or so around a contemporary book to discuss our areas of focus; make action-oriented connections to practice; and report back to the group with reflections, successes, challenges, and so on.

### *Funding and Recruitment*

On May 27, 2020—just two days after George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, was killed in police custody, sparking widespread protests of police violence across the globe—we received a small literacy grant to

provide books to participants free of charge. These funds were a catalyst in optimizing the success of the book club. While Floyd's death was not the impetus for the formation of the book club, we do believe it influenced the enthusiastic response from teachers when we began recruitment the following month. Floyd's killing at the hands of police shed a bright light on racism in societies around the world, and particularly in the United States. Considering the racial disparity between the teaching force and student bodies, teachers worldwide struggled to find ways to address with their students the seemingly constant stream of physical and psychological violence wrought by modern-day racism in society. In addition, teachers were struggling through the first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic at this time. As many studies have now documented, pandemic conditions and schools' responses highlighted systemic inequities that affect racialized students and multilingual learners, heightened students' and teachers' experiences of racial discrimination, and hindered teachers' abilities to provide equitable education to these learners (e.g., Cushing-Leubner et al., 2021; Henry & James, 2021).

Regarding recruitment, we first invited pre-service teachers who were just finishing their teacher education programs at our respective institutions in Canada and the United States. Then we reached out to experienced teachers affiliated with our institutions as graduates or supervising practitioners. As the number of interested participants grew, Denise Blanch—the third co-author of this article—joined the team as a third book-club co-host. In total, the founding members of the book club included three co-hosts and 37 new and experienced teachers. Of these, 27 were new teachers (with fewer than 5 years of classroom experience) and 13 were more experienced educators.

### *Vision and Norms*

Before hosting our first book-club meeting, we met to articulate our vision for the book club, some norms for participation, and a framework for responding to conflict should it arise. There were three main components to our book-club vision. First, we aimed to create an international learning community, where members would get to know and care about each other and respect each other's ideas, experiences, and ability to make change in the world. Second, we aimed to create a learning space beyond our respective teacher education programs that would be characterized by trust and respect. Recognizing that some members might hesitate to freely participate because we had once been their grade-givers or supervisors, we also wanted to clarify that in the book-club context, we were not experts, authorities, or even sole decision-makers. This space would be one without judgment, open to earnestly exploring the questions of the members. Third, we aimed to foster discussions that pushed members outside their comfort zones and in the direction of creating positive change in their classrooms and communities.

In addition, we developed the following norms to let all members know that, in service of the book-club vision, we expected the following:

- authentic and active participation—ask questions, make comments, suspend judgment
- respectful and thoughtful speech and actions
- dialogue rather than conflict in the face of strong and/or differing opinions
- no abusive, demeaning, discriminatory, or derogatory speech or actions
- mindfulness of the atmosphere and of your fellow participants
- confidentiality—keep conversations going outside book club, but no naming names
- committed attendance—show up, even if you didn't read the whole book
- above all, learn, reflect, and have fun!

Finally, we wanted to have in place a thoughtful approach to responding to conflict or offence, should it arise. Inspired by work taking place in California's Oakland Unified School District (OUSD Restorative

Justice, 2015), we agreed that we would use a restorative approach to conflict resolution. This approach privileges relationships, respect, responsibility, and dialogue. While it is beyond the scope of this article to fully describe restorative justice or how to implement it in learning spaces, for book-club members this approach meant that should something offensive take place, they would pause, identify how it made them feel, breathe to make space for these feelings, listen to one another, and reflect on the question “Am I trying to be right or am I trying to do better?” (Oluo, 2018, p. 48). As co-hosts, it would then be our responsibility to guide the group in a conversation that acknowledged these feelings and worked through them productively, guided by principles of repair rather than punishment. We hoped that by outlining this approach and modelling it, as necessary, we would send the message that actively creating healing classroom ecologies is an important, but sometimes overlooked part of enacting racial literacy. Though we never encountered a situation that required us to engage this process, we routinely reviewed the approach and its commitments at the beginning of book-club meetings.

### *Book Selection and Meeting Structure*

Co-hosts selected the first book, Ijeoma Oluo’s *So You Want to Talk About Race* (2018), while participants proposed and voted on subsequent reads: *Caste* by Isabel Wilkerson (2020) and *Cultivating Genius* by Gholdy Muhammad (2020). We selected *So You Want to Talk About Race* as a first read because we did not yet know the range of prior knowledge or investment our book-club members would be bringing regarding matters of race, education, and language. We aimed for an accessible, popular read. Oluo’s book, consequently, served as a great introductory text. We also wanted our meeting structure to reflect the goals of the book club. Since the book-club vision was all about building relationships, growing knowledge, and striving toward change, we organized each 90-minute meeting in order of those goals. An essential component of these meetings was the land acknowledgement at the start of each session. This practice was critical, as this is one way of recognizing the history and impact of colonialism, and our efforts, as a book club, to create more equitable spaces. Overall, all the book-club meetings followed a consistent routine. First, we offered time and discussion prompts for members to get to know one another, followed by an open discussion of the book in small groups. We wrapped up with individual takeaways and personal goals for classroom and/or community action. The meetings were all authentic discussions based on the chosen text, in-depth reflections, and sharing of personal narratives while connecting to the text. To make the meetings more productive and encourage continued reflection, members were asked to complete a brief survey before and after each meeting to share preliminary thoughts and provide further feedback after each book-club session.

### **Methods for Exploring Book-Club Impact**

We used a critical action research approach and qualitative inquiry methods to explore new teachers’ participation in book-club-style professional development as an approach to developing their racial literacy. Critical action research in education aims to understand and improve educational practices while promoting social change by altering traditional power dynamics between researchers and participants (Davis, 2008; Hinchey, 2016; Souto-Manning, 2012). Within this paradigm, qualitative inquiry helps researchers examine the relationship between a specific phenomenon and its contextual conditions to answer “how” or “why” questions without manipulating the behaviour of participants in the study (Creswell, 2014). We analyzed the experiences of multiple new teachers working in multilingual contexts to understand their process of racial literacy development within the bound system of the book club during the 2020–2021 school year.

## Participants

In this study, Brenda, Kathryn, and Denise were co-researchers alongside the 37 teacher participants (Table 1). Dr. Muzeta is a Black multilingual teacher educator and researcher from Zambia on faculty at Kutztown University in Pennsylvania. Dr. Accurso is a white, predominantly English-speaking teacher educator and literacy researcher from the United States on faculty at University of British Columbia in Vancouver. Denise is a bilingual Latin American ESL/EFL teacher and researcher from Chile, who studies literacy practices of multilingual migrant and refugee youth in Canada. Our identities were central to this inquiry. As individuals and emerging scholars from similar disciplines, we drew greatly from our lived experiences, understandings, and perceptions of the world. The diversity in teachers' racial, ethnic, and linguistic identities also played a critical role, bringing varied world experiences and understandings of racial literacy into book-club discussions about what it means for teaching and learning in multilingual communities. Each book club member brought their personal narratives, epistemologies, and varied worldviews, which all enhanced our discussions around issues of race, education, and language.

Table 1  
REAL Talk Book Club Member Demographics 2020–2021 ( $N = 40$ )

Location	Gender identity	Age	Years teaching	Grade level	Racial/ethnic identities represented <sup>a</sup>	Named languages represented <sup>a</sup>
British Columbia, Canada ( $n = 16$ )	Female ( $n = 37$ )	20–30 ( $n = 30$ )	0–1 years ( $n = 25$ )	Elementary ( $n = 20$ )	Asian Black Filipino Indigenous Latinx	English French Korean Mandarin Setswana
Pennsylvania, United States ( $n = 24$ )	Male ( $n = 3$ )	31–40 ( $n = 4$ )	2–5 years ( $n = 2$ )	Secondary ( $n = 16$ )	Puerto Rican white	Spanish Tagalog Taiwanese Tonga
		41–50 ( $n = 5$ )	5–10 years ( $n = 5$ )	Higher education (teacher education) ( $n = 4$ )		
		51–60 ( $n = 1$ )	11+ years ( $n = 8$ )			

<sup>a</sup> We did not attempt to quantify participants' racial, ethnic, or linguistic identities.

In choosing to participate in this action-oriented book club together, all 40 participants put their teaching and learning on the table as a site of inquiry. We committed to routine critical reflection and opened our ways of thinking, being, and doing to questioning by one another, a degree of vulnerability not necessarily required by other forms of education research.

## *Data Generation and Analysis*

We intentionally did not record the book-club meetings because we did not want either to compromise participants' feeling that they could speak freely on potentially difficult topics or to send the message that the research component of the project took priority over the relational aspect. Instead, data included written reading reflections submitted by teachers before each book-club meeting, post-meeting surveys, co-host field notes, and co-host analytical memos. We analyzed and interpreted these data qualitatively, drawing on practices associated with grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) and the following analytical process (Creswell, 2014). First, directly after each book-club meeting, the co-hosts met for in-the-moment reviewing of data from the whole group of teacher participants (e.g., pre-meeting submissions from teachers, field notes taken during the meeting). After this debrief and as post-meeting survey data came in, each co-host generated analytical memos that captured emerging interpretations of new teachers' development processes.

At the end of the year, we purposefully selected three focal teachers who captured the diverse teaching contexts, racial and gender identities, and ages of new teacher members in the book club. We individually coded data associated with each teacher, inductively noting observations about anything that stood out to us, and deductively noting observations that seemed pertinent to our guiding question (Saldaña, 2016). Afterward, we held group analysis and interpretation meetings where the co-hosts discussed our coding of each individual data set and then refined our codes through discussion and by looking across all three focal teachers (e.g., their understandings of race/racism; types of growth, affordances, challenges). These analytical discussions allowed us to orally co-construct new understandings of the data and contribute to one another's sense-making through deep reflection on our own positionalities, ideologies, and development of racial literacies and those captured in and across data associated with each focal teacher. Finally, we reviewed the data to identify cross-cutting themes that might help us return to the intention for the book club with some empirical grounding. This research process incorporated validity strategies such as prolonged time with participants, triangulation across multiple types and sources of data, and member checks between co-hosts and focal teachers (Creswell, 2014).

## **Findings**

In this section, we introduce the three focal teachers and findings illustrated by vignettes from each regarding how the book club functioned to support new teacher participants in growing their racial literacy and antiracist awareness for addressing injustices in their various spheres of influence. These findings, shared with profound respect for participants' candid reflections and contributions, highlight the extent to which this mode of professional development (1) created an extended learning environment for new teachers to grow their racial literacy in tandem with their developing classroom practice, (2) fostered understanding among participants living and teaching in different parts of North America and the ways in which issues of race and language were both common across contexts and locally inflected, and (3) supported the development of mentoring relationships for new teachers to navigate the complexities of antiracism work in their specific multilingual K–12 settings.

### *Finding 1: An Extended Learning Environment for Growing Racial Literacy in Tandem with Classroom Practice*

Our first finding concerns how the book club worked as a type of extended learning environment where new teachers could continue to grow their racial literacy as they were gaining more experience with students, now being in the classroom as teachers every day. To illustrate this finding, we introduce a new

teacher we will call “Ms. Yang” (a pseudonym). Ms. Yang is a young, bicultural, and trilingual kindergarten and Grade 1 teacher in the greater Vancouver area. She grew up in Taiwan with her parents and younger sister, and together they immigrated to Canada when Ms. Yang was 13 years old.

In 2020, Ms. Yang graduated from an 11-month elementary generalist teacher-preparation program with special attention to the needs of multilingual learners after having completed eight months of coursework and a kindergarten student teaching experience in one of the largest and most racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse school districts in Western Canada. Recognizing these diversities as rich assets for teaching and learning, Ms. Yang was very intentional about pursuing a position in this same district after earning her BEd degree and teacher certification, and was offered a position in a combined grades K/1 classroom. She joined the REAL Talk Book Club just prior to beginning her first year in this role.

As Ms. Yang was making sense of new concepts related to race and language through our book-club readings, she was also constantly using those concepts and the space of the book club to try these out as lenses for seeing part of what was happening in her K/1 classroom. For example, as illustrated in Figure 1, while reading and discussing *So You Want to Talk About Race* (Oluo, 2018), Ms. Yang became aware of the language and concept of racial microaggressions. She said, “‘Microaggressions’ was a new word to me, but now that I have that word, I see them everywhere. And I realize my kids are learning these actions but maybe not the language, like I didn’t” (August 2020). Similarly, the language and concept of “caste” became part of her consciousness through reading and discussing *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (Wilkerson, 2020).

While Ms. Yang had been previously introduced in her teacher education coursework to readings about educational inequities faced by multilingual children (e.g., Cummins & Early, 2015), her limited classroom experience at the time meant she was not able to see the nuanced ways in which these inequities pervade classrooms and schools and intertwine with racism. She reported that, as a preservice teacher learning about racism and linguistic bias in schooling, her thinking was limited to “Are these things happening at my school?” (January 2021). However, as an in-service teacher processing these concepts alongside daily classroom experience, Ms. Yang was better equipped not only to wonder *whether* deficit ideologies around race and language were at play in her school but also to accept that they were and notice *how* they were at play. She reported noticing microaggressions “everywhere” at her school (August 2020) and coming to accept that her school is “a microcosm of the world” (January 2021). Further, because Ms. Yang now saw herself as an official member of her school community, as opposed to a temporary student teacher, she felt greater freedom to imagine what she could do from her role in the school.

From this stance, Ms. Yang began to experiment with designing and implementing what she saw as age-appropriate pedagogical responses. For example, she used the book club space to explore the kinds of deficit messaging related to race, language, and other identities that children as young as five and six may be encountering in her community and school. Then she asked her peers in the book club to help her brainstorm how she could try to reply, with both her classroom talk and her curriculum. One of the resulting classroom activities she designed and implemented was a “Kindness Tree” (Figure 2), where she and her students consistently practiced reframing deficit messages with an asset orientation, or “kindness,” as she framed it for her K/1 students.

Ms. Yang’s experiences echo those of other participants who processed the book-club experience similarly, consistently attempting to connect book-club readings and discussions with their practice. This was an encouraging finding to us because it suggested the potential for sustained activism through this form of professional development. As we previously mentioned, the onset of a global pandemic and the murder of George Floyd, which coincided with the launch of the book club, sparked a sudden desire to do *something* among many people who had not previously felt moved to activism. One rapidly mobilized form of “doing something” was the formation of racial justice book clubs. Though our book club was not conceptualized or launched with that impulse, we were very aware of the number of people (particularly in dominant social positions) joining book clubs at the time, and we were conscious of critiques in

Figure 1

Illustrative Quotes from "Ms. Yang"

"Microaggressions" was a new word to me [in our first book], but now that I have that word I see them everywhere. And I realize my kids are learning these actions but maybe not the language, like I didn't  
Aug 2020

School is like a caste system; a microcosm of the world, and as I was reading, I just kept asking myself, "WHAT IS MY ROLE?"  
Jan 2021

We can -- and we can teach children to -- pay attention to the questions we ask when we first meet a person. We can change the containers [i.e., categorical ways of knowing people]  
Jan 2021

"Ms. Yang"

- First year K/1 teacher in British Columbia
- Grew up in Taiwan; fluent in Mandarin, Taiwanese, & English
- Prioritizes emotional connection and imagination in her teaching
- Intentional about teaching in a racially & linguistically diverse district

Figure 2

Kindergarten/Grade 1 Kindness Tree from Ms. Yang's Classroom



mainstream media and from some of our mentors and friends in academia regarding racial justice book clubs as "comfortable" but relatively inert spaces as far as social action goes (e.g., Fallon, 2020; Johnson, 2020). As a result, the REAL Talk Book Club was action-oriented—a means to an end, rather than the end itself. As New York poet, racial literacy expert, and teacher educator Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz (2020) wisely said, "No book-club can make you anti-racist. It's great to be part of a book club and build that knowledge but it cannot stop there. We have to read our heart and then read books." Based on the case of Ms. Yang and some of our other data, we might add "then read your classroom" to that sequence. Perhaps unlike the general public, our data suggest that when teachers are involved in action-oriented book clubs, there is support for their growing awareness to be very specific to their multilingual classrooms and lead to ongoing cycles of action and inquiry (see also Souto-Manning, 2012).

### *Finding 2: Understanding International and Local Inflections of Racism*

Our second finding has to do with the international nature of the book club and the way in which that was both a challenge and an affordance for participants in terms of understanding how issues of race and language are both common across contexts *and* locally inflected. We illustrate this finding through a second new teacher vignette, this one centring on "Ms. Mackenzie," a first-year elementary-school resource teacher who switched careers after 20 years as a communications specialist. Ms. Mackenzie is the youngest of eight children and was born and raised in Canada, where she reported, "there's a general tendency for many Canadians to think of race and racism as a U.S. problem" (June 2020). Like Ms. Yang, Ms. Mackenzie graduated in 2020 from an 11-month elementary generalist program with special attention to the needs of multilingual learners. She was the "much older" teacher candidate in her cohort but was eager to try out all she was learning, and she enthusiastically reported back to her cohort on every lesson she tried out in her Grade 6/7 practicum class. She was at a self-described life stage of "trying new things" (August 2020). After graduation, Ms. Mackenzie accepted a full-time resource teacher position at an elementary school serving a richly multilingual community; over half the students were designated English learners.

Ms. Mackenzie's book-club participation captured the affordances of an international model of professional development, which opened up new space for teachers in both countries to establish some common ground and talk about how issues of race and language are both the same and different across their contexts. For instance, Ms. Mackenzie very openly shared her "aha" moments regarding Canadian inflections of white supremacy and English supremacy even though Canada is, as she pointed out, "a mosaic, not a melting pot" (August 2020). For example, while discussing Isabel Wilkerson's *Caste* (2020), she remarked that, "[In Canada], we think it's lovely to have 'cultural neighborhoods' because it's what we want to believe ... that we are truly integrated and multicultural. But we've made a container there. And we notice when people are outside that container" (January 2021). After further discussion with her American counterparts, she concluded, "My eyes are open.... We're not different here in Canada. It's not just people with hate-filled hearts [spreading white supremacy], it's every day, word-of-mouth, casual conversations that spread our understanding of hierarchy and who belongs where. We [white Canadians] are numb to it and don't even see how we are perpetuating it ourselves."

Interestingly, as a mature person but a new teacher, Ms. Mackenzie's developing racial literacy led her to take action not as much initially in her interactions with students but with former colleagues and other adults in her friend groups. As shown in Figure 3, Ms. Mackenzie saw her community of influence as other "middle-aged white women" who may not yet have been exposed to the kinds of conversations she was having through her teacher education program and into the book club. She said, "I'm growing in my awareness of race issues and I just really want to be able to facilitate these kinds of conversations myself. Even already, I can't stop calling my friends ... to say you've gotta listen to this thing I'm reading" (August 2020).

Figure 3

Illustrative Quotes from “Ms. Mackenzie”

I'm growing in my awareness of race issues and I just really want to be able to facilitate these kinds of conversations myself. Even already, I can't stop calling my friends, who are, like, a bunch of middle-aged white women -- and they are pretty...white -- to say you've gotta listen to this thing I'm reading  
Aug 2020

My eyes are open. This book really convinced me that we're not different here in Canada. It's not just people with hate-filled hearts [spreading white supremacy], it's everyday, word-of-mouth, casual conversations that spread our understanding of hierarchy and who belongs where. We [white Canadians] are numb to it and don't even see how we are perpetuating it ourselves.  
Jan 2021

We think it's lovely to have "cultural neighborhoods" because it's what we want to believe...that we are truly integrated and multicultural. But we've made a container there. And we notice when people are outside that container.  
Jan 2021

**"Ms. Mackenzie"**

- First year K-7 resource teacher in British Columbia after 20 years in communications
- Grew up in Edmonton; speaks primarily English et un peu de français
- Works at the same school as another *REAL Talk* member
- At a self-described life stage of embracing new things

As university teacher educators and people involved in a lot of professional development efforts, we found this vignette to be connected to something that is often on our minds—the degree to which critical conversations travel outside university classrooms or workshops into teachers’ spheres of influence, namely, their communities, classrooms, or colleagues. Other scholars have found that it can be quite common for students in university settings to have eye-opening experiences and critical conversations around whiteness and racism in the relative safety of a college classroom, but that those conversations do not always travel outside the university into friends and family groups (e.g., Storms, 2012). Ms. Mackenzie’s vignette points to the potential for shifting this trend by providing new teachers with a safe, ongoing touchpoint in the form of a book club. For Ms. Mackenzie, the REAL Talk Book Club provided a touchpoint where she could hear other perspectives from local and international peers, practice articulating her own, and feel like she had the support and practice to take her learning to her people, as she defined them.

*Finding 3: New Teachers’ Access to Mentoring*

Our third finding has to do with the intergenerational nature of the book club, as opposed to one set up solely for new teachers. Through a third vignette, we will illustrate the strong possibilities this model offered for new teacher mentorship. At the time of this study, “Mr. Wilson” was a first-year English language arts teacher in central Pennsylvania, teaching Grade 8. After earning an MEd and initial certification in English in 2020, Mr. Wilson began a full-time long-term substitute position in the school district neighbouring the one he grew up in as a K–12 student himself. His new school district had what he described as “noticeably different” demographics (January 2021), different linguistic and racial diversities, school resources, and—particularly puzzling to him—different expectations for the level of curriculum and achievement.

While participating in the REAL Talk Book Club, Mr. Wilson, like Ms. Mackenzie, experienced some eye-opening moments. During our first book-club meeting, he waited until nearly the end of the session to

speaking before shaking his head, rubbing his beard, and saying, "I've read thousands of books, but this is the first book I've ever read about race. That's mind-blowing to me. And, you know, I just didn't realize how far it [racism] goes. It's so much bigger than I realized" (August 2020; see Figure 4). Over time, part of the bigness Mr. Wilson realized was the ways in which racism might be operating in his community and in his new school. For example, he had noticed how some teachers at his new school talked about the predominantly Black and Latinx, racially and linguistically minoritized children they were serving. He described a colleague telling him how "you just can't have the same high expectations for them as you could for students in [the neighbouring (much whiter) school district]" (January 2021). Mr. Wilson did not know how to respond—either to his colleague or with his curriculum—to what he was now understanding as an example of racism influencing the education of his multilingual students. He asked the more experienced educators in the group, "How can I deal with how [racism] impacts my students? I can see a kind of tracking system at my new school. How can I respond when my new colleagues talk about how you can't have high standards for 'these kids'?" (January 2021). After Mr. Wilson shared this dilemma, we also observed something that took place in other instances. For Mr. Wilson, and others like him, the book club was functioning as a place where they could safely aim those questions at more experienced educators in the group. At the end of that book-club session, Mr. Wilson reported, "My takeaway after this conversation is the importance of this book club cohort and having someone to ask questions to" (January 2021).

Figure 4

Illustrative Quotes from "Mr. Wilson"

I've read thousands of books, but this is the first book I've ever read about race. That's mind-blowing to me. And, you know, I just didn't realize how far it [racism] goes. It's so much bigger than I realized.  
Aug 2020

So you want to talk about race

Good intentions are not what counts if the effect is that someone is offended.  
Aug 2020

Getting into this one, personally my reaction was I shouldn't feel guilty about this house [i.e., the history of racism in society], but it's like, how can I deal with how it impacts my students? I can SEE a kind of tracking system at my new school. How can I respond when my new colleagues talk about how you can't have high standards for "these kids"?  
Jan 2021

Caste  
The Origins of Discrimination  
Isabel Wilkerson

**"Mr. Wilson"**

- First year 8th grade English language arts teacher in Pennsylvania
- Works in a neighbouring district to where he grew up; "very urban and Hispanic"
- Struggles to navigate the different expectations and levels of challenge/support he sees unfolding for students in his new district

Having someone to ask really specific professional questions to after graduation was something that stuck with Mr. Wilson. Moreover, his intuition about the value of this kind of sustained support echoes a broader finding in teacher education research, which shows that supporting teachers' critical awareness rarely happens without sustained professional development. For example, a recent literature review of

publications reporting on 35 different professional development efforts for K–12 teachers of multilingual students in the United States found that in nearly every case of teachers making gains in critical awareness from language-focused professional development, “these gains resulted from sustained forms of PD” (Accurso & Gebhard, 2021, p. 13).

## Discussion

These findings corroborate and extend other studies of educators’ racial literacy development. For example, Oto and colleagues’ (2023) systematic research review found that racial literacy development in education has both ideological and curricular components. Our analysis of three focal teachers’ experiences also documents such components, such as Ms. Mackenzie’s and Mr. Wilson’s changing beliefs about the presence and influence of racism in their contexts, and Ms. Yang’s attention to classroom practice. Though not speaking from a TESOL perspective, T. Epstein and Gist (2015) argue that both components are necessary for meaningful social change in K–12 settings, to challenge persistent deficit views of racially and linguistically diverse students and families and to counter longstanding avoidance of issues of race and racism in K–12 education (see also S. Epstein & Schiebe, 2019; Skerrett, 2011). Our study extends these arguments into the space of multilingual teacher education.

In doing so, we join conversations among scholars in applied linguistics, TESOL, linguistic anthropology, and related fields who are similarly grappling with issues of race, language, education, and the relationship between them. For example, a rapidly unfolding area of theoretical development asks important questions about how language and race relate to each other and what the implications of this relationship are for the (re)imagination, (re)design, or even abolishment of different multilingual learner pedagogies and educational contexts (e.g., Bale et al., 2023; Crump, 2014; Flores & Rosa, 2019; Kubota, 2002; Kubota & Lin, 2006; Motha, 2014; Rosa, 2019). Regarding language and race, is one merely a proxy for the other? Is linguisticism a form of racism? Is racism a more serious or “bigger” problem than language-based discrimination? These are just a few of the questions that scholars are working through right now on this issue.

These are critical questions, and while answering them is beyond the scope of this article, our study highlights how book clubs such as the one described here may provide a space where teachers and teacher educators can productively explore questions like these, even as they may run out of time in their larger teacher education courses or programs. After all, as Nieto (2005, p. 8) points out, “caring and committed” educators cannot wait for these questions to be settled before showing up to teach students like Daliba, who we met at the beginning of this article. Rather, we must continue to pursue questions like these together, through habits of lifelong learning that will support multilingual learners’ engagement, growth, critical thinking, and well-being in schools. Based on the findings presented in this study, we are cautiously hopeful that further racial literacy development that engages lines of questioning, such as those listed above, will take place in subsequent years of the book club.

## Limitations

Our limited focus on Year 1 of the book-club initiative represents one of three limitations in this study. First, because we focused only on the book club’s first year, the data did not lead us deep into discussions about the intertwined nature of racism and linguistic discrimination in North America. Rather, the data showed participants learning to see racism in their multilingual life and work contexts and how they responded to these new observations. Correia and Boivin (2023) also document promising practices in Year 1 of a teacher book club focused on racism, and, like us, they call for follow-up studies and more longitudinal research.

A second limitation relates to the book club's structure. After the first read (Oluo, 2018), teacher members chose the texts. They gravitated toward books that were more focused on race than language, so co-hosts had to invite connections to language teaching and learning, as the selected books did not always explicitly attend to these connections. Following on Year 1, now that we have built rapport and seen development along the lines documented in this article, we would consider inserting some suggestions into future reading lists, such as Suhanthie Motha's (2014) book, which offers an explicit discussion about how race, power, and language are interrelated through the eyes of four first-year educators, challenging language-teacher readers to dig into the historical context of English language education. Additionally, understanding potential differences in how participants of colour and white book-club members might experience book discussions, we might consider race-based caucusing models, where future book-club discussions would offer space for racialized and white members to talk in self-selected affinity groups before coming together for joint discussion, as Manka Varghese and colleagues (2019) do to support racial literacy in their language teacher education program.

Lastly, we note that our study was not designed to characterize book-club members' levels of racial literacy. Rather, as co-hosts in Year 1 of a new initiative, we prioritized looking at members' critical inclinations and connections to practice. Future studies of this initiative could usefully adopt Allison Skerrett's (2011) framework for understanding US and Canadian teachers' levels of racial literacy.

## **Implications for Teacher Education and Professional Development**

We are living at a time when race and racism are core issues, a time that has only highlighted the incredible need for professional development that supports teachers' ability to engage in racially literate discussions related to their work and to transform their practice (Howard, 2019). For teachers of multilingual learners, particularly those in dominating social positions, developing racial literacy involves intentionally exploring patterns of racial privilege and linguistic privilege in society. Additionally, it requires introspection on issues of race, language, and difference.

Toward these aims, we draw out three implications for teacher education and professional development from the findings of this study. First is the potential of meeting teachers where they are at in their racial literacy journey. Evidence from the inaugural year of the REAL Talk Book Club suggests that action-oriented book clubs for teachers can have wide reach—with children in classrooms, as in the case of Ms. Yang; with friends and family members, as in the case of Ms. Mackenzie; and potentially with colleagues, as in the case of Mr. Wilson. Therefore, we will continue to explore the role this kind of professional development can play both in and outside the classroom.

Second, our findings call into question assumptions about mentoring models for new teachers. Educational researchers widely agree that mentoring is a crucial support strategy for new teachers transitioning into the profession, improving competence and motivation in ways that impact the standard of educational and developmental experiences that new teachers provide (Tang et al., 2015). Yet major mentoring models assume that teacher educators serve as mentors during the teacher education program and that responsibility for mentoring is then taken up by more experienced teachers and other colleagues after graduation (Kemmis et al., 2014). Many of our book-club participants did not experience this kind of smooth transition from one set of mentors to another, so the book club fulfilled this need. As Mr. Wilson explained, having someone to ask particular professional questions to after graduating was one of the main benefits he obtained from this experience, showing us the need for new teachers to have someone to confide in and voice their doubts with at the very beginning of their teaching career. Additionally, we could observe how Ms. Yang went even one step further—from ideation to action—taking some of the ideas from some of the more experienced teachers from the book club and integrating them into her classroom. As a result, we recommend that teacher education programs and school districts be in closer communication about

designing and implementing mentoring programs that address new teachers' vulnerable first years in the profession.

Third, though it can be difficult, especially in the wake of the COVID pandemic, to see universities as places with lots of resources, this action research project has reminded us that as university teacher educators, there are a lot of resources available to us—not just money but also people, relationships, materials, and ideas. We must think creatively about how to leverage these resources to counter the effects of short and shorter teacher education programs that produce graduates, such as the teacher whose words opened this article, when many are just starting to get a toehold on understanding the role of race and racism in the schooling of multilingual children.

In conclusion, we hope that this work will support readers in reflecting on the degree to which their programming mentors teacher candidates into understandings about how race and racism influence language teaching and learning. But perhaps more importantly, we hope it will influence readers' efforts to create community and strengthen accountability around issues of racial and linguistic justice in their own contexts. Our experiences with the REAL Talk Book Club—particularly as co-researchers coming from varied racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds and with different life experiences—suggest there is strength in coming to the conversation, coming from varied contexts, and working toward the common goal of deepening teachers' (and teacher educators') racial literacy.

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