Four-year-old Yasmin, who is Black, walks into the dramatic play area, enjoying the sound of the beads in her braids clicking to the rhythm of her steps. Her teacher, Ms. Cindy, who is White, and her friend Alexis, who is Black, are sitting on the floor, talking and braiding the dolls’ hair. Ms. Cindy and Alexis take turns choosing beads to put in the dolls’ braids.

Recognizing this familiar scenario, Yasmin picks up a doll and declares, “I’m Auntie Doreen.” She sits down to join the play. Thinking about how carefully her mother brushes her hair, Yasmin picks up a plastic banana and tells another child, “My baby likes this brush because it is the softest.”
Later, Ms. Cindy reads aloud *I Love My Hair* (Tarpley 2001) and talks with the children about the things adults do to help children take care of their hair. Children share their experiences: “My mother washes my hair every night and dries it with the little blue towel,” says Tatiana; “I sit on a chair in the backyard while my grandpa shaves my head,” states Delavan. Ms. Cindy reiterates that children have different types of hair and there are different ways adults care for children’s hair, but these actions all show love. She asks the children whether they have noticed that differences in their hair are related to differences in their races and ethnicities.

Showing children that we see and value all aspects of them—including attributes related to race and culture—is a critical step in helping them feel welcome and connected to their teachers and peers. In the preschool classroom in the vignette, Yasmin sees others engaging happily in a familiar routine that is part of her family life. When her teacher intentionally participates in this play and follows up with a book about it, she is sending the message to Yasmin and her peers that this classroom is a place where all children—no matter their culture or ethnicity—can feel comfortable being themselves. Yasmin not only expresses aspects of her racial and cultural identity through her play, but she also takes pride in sharing them with others. Moments like this help convey to Yasmin that she is accepted in this classroom and can safely build a strong relationship with her teacher. This feeling of trust is crucial because it sets the stage for Yasmin to engage freely in exploration and learning.

**Addressing race in early education classrooms**

Early childhood educators are well versed in the importance of building relationships with children of diverse backgrounds, but many try to do so using a color-blind approach—that is, they do not directly talk about race or race-related experiences (Husband 2012). This approach, although not intended to be harmful, may send the negative message to children of color that their teachers do not recognize or feel comfortable acknowledging a salient and influential part of their identity: their race. Researchers and practitioners are still figuring out how best to address race so young children can develop their own positive racial identity, build relationships across races, and recognize and stand up to race-related injustices. There are a number of ways early childhood educators can approach race in the classroom. We refer to these practices as race-related teaching practices (RRTPs). In this article we begin to address the need for these practices by offering categories for thinking about RRTPs and suggesting ways teachers can use children’s literature to welcome related conversations.

Children's literature offers an engaging vehicle for generating these conversations, as depicted in the opening vignette. We see these discussions about race in relation to children’s books as part of a larger effort to revise conceptualization of high-quality early childhood education to include teaching practices that intentionally address race. As Ladson-Billings (1995) stated, addressing race in our teaching practices “challenge[s] us to reconsider what we mean by ‘good’ teaching” (163).

**Children see race, and so should we**

Children’s ideas about their own race and others’ races are forming in early childhood, regardless of whether the topic of race is directly addressed, completely ignored, or actively suppressed in their classrooms (Derman-Sparks & Edwards 2010). Each approach sends a message, intentional or not, about how children should think about and understand racial differences at a time in their lives when they are beginning to notice and respond to race. Children as young as 3 months are aware of racial differences, and by the time they are preschoolers, they make choices, based on race, about with whom to play and how (Katz & Kofkin 1997; Van Ausdale & Feagin 2001; Hirschfeld 2008; Quintana & McKown 2008). In the absence of intentional teaching, children are left to come to their own conclusions about how to think about their own race and others’ races. Research suggests that the common practice of ignoring race in early childhood classrooms is not satisfactory and that educators must take a more active, anti-bias approach to addressing issues of culture and race if they are to enact positive change (Derman-Sparks & Edwards 2010).
In the United States, the majority of early childhood teachers are White (Saluja, Early, & Clifford 2002). Classrooms—and the educational materials chosen, like children's books—often reflect the values and beliefs prevalent in a traditional White ethos. When educators do not notice this and do not attempt to counterbalance the primacy given to White early childhood experiences, they miss opportunities to teach children that all races should be valued. As a result, White children may subconsciously learn that their race holds a privileged status compared to others, and non-White children may learn that their race does not (Clark & Clark 1950; Van Ausdale & Feagin 2001). The good news is that there are opportunities to teach children that we value all cultures and aim to be fair to people of all races. By shifting classroom practices, early childhood educators can positively impact children's acceptance of their own race and others' races.

**Race-related teaching practices in classrooms**

For adults working with young children, RRTPs may include helping children to develop positive racial identity, the ability to build relationships across races, and the awareness of race-related injustices and the inclination to take action to stop them (Durden, Escalante, & Blitch 2015).

We propose thinking about three categories of RRTPs—color-blind, color-aware, and social justice approaches. As mentioned earlier, the color-blind approach is a common but ineffective and potentially harmful method in which adults do not directly talk about race with children, yet the absence of an intentional message about race sends a powerful message in itself. Children are left to develop their own understandings about race, and if they ask questions, they may be met with adults declining to talk about race at school.

An improvement on the color-blind approach is a color-aware approach. To be color aware is to intentionally teach children about race and tell them that we see and value their race because it is an important part of who they are. Adults in color-aware classrooms bring up race in direct and positive ways, take advantage of teachable moments, and respond to children's race-related questions and interactions with books and activities to advance the conversation.

One step beyond color awareness is a social justice approach to teaching about race. This RRTP is considered ideal because it empowers children to play a role in acting against discrimination. Teachers using this approach to help children learn how to actively recognize and act on race-related injustices. Taking a social justice approach means seeking out teachable moments that specifically have to do with unfairness or discrimination, such as suggesting children write a letter to a company that makes “flesh-colored” bandages to let them know that their products do not match all skin tones and to propose that the name or the colors should be changed.

Ultimately, educators can look for opportunities to infuse all aspects of children's learning with color awareness and social justice connections. Although addressing all aspects of classroom practice is ideal, teachers who are new to RRTPs may find it easiest to begin with children's literature, an accessible medium for early childhood educators.

**Racially relevant children’s literature**

Children's literature has enormous potential for helping children develop positive racial identity. In 1965, Nancy Larrick wrote passionately about the “all-White world of children's books,” noting that the body of children's literature overwhelmingly featured characters who were White and that the books were aimed at a White readership. Some 50 years later, children's book author Walter Dean Myers (2014) posed a question in the New York Times: “Where are the people of color in children's books?” The question remains a sound one. Many scholars have examined the topic of diversity in children's literature, noting that the majority of publications continue to portray a homogeneous, White, middle-class existence as the norm (Horning, Lindgren, & Schleisman 2013; Boyd, Causey, & Galda 2015). These portrayals are not consistent with the lives of many children and their families.

Books can be mirrors in which children see and savor images and representations similar to their own lives and experiences. They can also be windows that enable young readers to gain new cultural perspectives by peering into others' worlds (Bishop 1990; Botelho & Rudman 2009). Teachers and other caring adults can make the most of these mirrors and windows.
by selecting literature that represents the diverse experiences of children and using it effectively to develop culturally responsive classrooms that promote color awareness and social justice (Paley 1998; Laminack & Wadsworth 2012). (See “Tips for Selecting Diverse Children’s Literature.”) Note that although it is important to share, explore, and learn about all cultures and races, in the limited space this article provides, the authors focus on children’s literature that mainly highlights the African-American experience.

Choosing high-quality, diverse literature

Children need access to books that reflect their own race, culture, experiences, and context. Literature should include representations of different aspects of daily life within a culture, with particular attention given to aspects of setting and racial relevance (Yenika-Agbaw & Napoli 2011). Ezra Jack Keats, for example, was among the first picture book creators to portray a cast of Black characters in an urban setting. More than a half century later, children still enjoy reading The Snowy Day (Keats 1962), which follows Peter, a young Black child, as he plays in the snow. The story is one that unites a child’s sense of excitement with the warmth of family love—all situated in an urban setting. Another example is Tap Tap Boom Boom (Bluemle 2014), which provides a lyrical look at a rainstorm and the way it plays out in the streets of a diverse city. The rain sends everyone ducking for cover, resulting in chance meetings and the beginning of new relationships, including interracial ones. Readers might also seek poetry grounded in the daily lives of Black children in varied settings, such as Thanks a Million by Nikki Grimes (2006), Brothers & Sisters: Family Poems by Eloise Greenfield (2009), and Honey, I Love,
also by Greenfield (2002). (See “Selected Children’s Literature With Racially Diverse Characters and Themes,” for more suggestions.)

It is important to look carefully at unique issues of racial relevance. Physical aspects, for example, are addressed in Jabari Asim’s companion board books Whose Toes Are Those? (2006) and Whose Knees Are These? (2006). These joyful, rhyming texts celebrate Black and Brown bodies. Likewise, I Love My Hair by Natasha Tarpley (2001), Big Hair, Don’t Care by Crystal Swain-Bates (2013), and Emi’s Curly, Coily, Cotton Candy Hair by Tina Olajide (2014) reinforce the beauty of thick, curly hair more typical of Black children.

Using literature as an entry point to discussions about race

Books that provide readers with opportunities to see different aspects of themselves, their communities, and the people they love can serve as material tools that affirm their sense of racial identity (Bishop 1990; Yenika-Agbaw & Napoli 2011). Such books can serve as springboards for teachable moments and meaningful conversations reflecting the teacher’s color awareness and orientation toward thinking and acting from a social justice perspective. It is important to remember, however, that no book can fully represent a group or a complex issue. Rather, it is helpful to think in terms of text sets, or collections of connected books, that address different perspectives on topics.

Consider the following scenarios—one in which a teacher uses a color-aware approach and the other in which a teacher uses a social justice approach.

Tasha comes to kindergarten, excited to share news that her baby brother has been born. Other children want to share stories about what happened when their siblings joined their families. Ms. Franklin asks the children to describe what babies look like and then reads Happy in Our Skin, by Fran Manushkin (2015), a poetic celebration of different skin tones:

Bouquets of babies sweet to hold:
  cocoa brown,
  cinnamon,
  and honey gold.
Ginger-colored babies,
  peaches and cream,
  too—splendid skin for me,
  splendid skin for you!

These words prompt the children to describe their own skin. “My skin is cinnamon,” one child offers. “Mine is more cocoa,” says another. Ms. Franklin affirms their observations: “Each of us is unique. We are different in lots of ways, including our races.” She then takes out multicultural paint and guides the children as they mix colors to match their own skin.

In this snapshot, Ms. Franklin, using a color-aware approach, reads to the children from high-quality literature that addresses concepts related to racial differences in a positive manner. Second, she encourages them to respond to the text. Finally, she uses the opportunity to extend children’s consideration of their racial identity by giving them the time, materials, and pedagogical support to extend their learning through an appropriate activity.

Let’s look at another example of effective use of RRTPs and children’s literature. Before story time, a first grade teacher has planned ways to help the children think
about different aspects of the text, including issues related to race.

Mr. Harkins gathers the children for a read-aloud of *Mr. George Baker* by Amy Hest (2007), the story of a friendship across both age and race. In the text, young Harry is mesmerized by Mr. George Baker. At age 100, George has accomplished many things—he is a talented musician with a loving wife and a warm home. Yet he has never learned to read—a problem that he indicates “must be corrected.” Harry and George are bound together in their pursuit of learning—Harry in the first grade and George in adult education.

Afterward, individual children comment on different parts of the story. One child mentions his relationship with an older neighbor to whom he and his mother take treats. Another says, “George could really play!” He then stands and taps out his own rhythm, just as Mr. Baker does in the book. “It’s too bad George never learned to read, but he’s going to now—even though he’s old,” says another. Mr. Harkins smiles and says that they really noticed a lot. Then, he adds, “It’s great that Mr. Baker is learning to read. Hmm . . . I wonder why he waited. Does anyone have thoughts on why he didn’t learn to read before?”

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**Examples of How to Use Children’s Literature to Discuss Race**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author/ Illustrator</th>
<th>Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Last Stop on Market Street</td>
<td>Matt de la Peña, illus. by Christian Robinson</td>
<td>2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happy Like Soccer</td>
<td>Maribeth Boelts, illus. by Lauren Castillo</td>
<td>2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amazing Grace</td>
<td>Mary Hoffman, illus. by Caroline Binch</td>
<td>1991</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happy in Our Skin</td>
<td>Fran Manushkin, illus. by Lauren Tobia</td>
<td>2015</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**Purpose for RRTPs:**

- **Last Stop on Market Street**: Highlights finding beauty in difficult life circumstances. Invites readers to ask questions about how economic limitations can impact specific racial groups.
- **Happy Like Soccer**: Presents a portrait of economic disparities between poorer urban areas and higher income suburbs—and their impact on practical social and emotional factors in children’s lives.
- **Amazing Grace**: Provides a model for ways children can discuss and deal with negative, discouraging, and inaccurate comments about racial limitations.
- **“More, More, More,” Said the Baby**: Invites children to discuss their family’s racial composition and describe the ways their family shares love.
- **Happy in Our Skin**: Offers a jumping-off point for children to use positive, descriptive language to describe their own skin color.
Through his question, the teacher has opened up a social justice teaching moment. The children can consider possible reasons why Mr. Baker did not learn to read. Could it have been because he didn’t finish school? Was he doing other things, like working or helping at home? Could it be that Mr. Baker was not welcomed at school? Did race play a part in this? By introducing important issues that might not be readily apparent, teachers provide children with opportunities to become critical readers who can move beyond the text of a book to read between the lines. They can use a social justice lens to view and discuss sensitive historical and current events.

Introducing RRTPs to colleagues and families

As is the case for any new practice, it is always wise to first stop and reflect on the perspectives of colleagues and other important adults in children’s lives. This is especially necessary when teaching about race. Many of the strategies described here may not be considered controversial, but some will. It may be useful to speak to other teachers about what they feel is appropriate for the children you serve. If everyone is not on the same page, consider beginning a book study group to talk about the role of RRTPs in early childhood classrooms. In addition, you might engage families by asking if and how they talk about race at home. (“Examples of How to Use Literature to Discuss Race,” p. 13, may be helpful to families as well as teachers.) Many will be happy to hear that you are starting this conversation at school, but some may have concerns.

As educators begin thinking more about RRTPs, the early childhood field will generate more examples of using materials—children’s literature, the classroom environment, free play scenarios, outdoor play, and other interactions and experiences—to bring the subject of race into the classroom. Now is the time to begin this work to ensure that educators are offering children guidance in this important aspect of their development.

References


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**About the authors**

**Shannon B. Wanless,** PhD, is an assistant professor of psychology in education at the University of Pittsburgh in Pennsylvania and a faculty fellow for Pitt’s Center for Urban Education. Formerly a Head Start teacher, Shannon researches the social-emotional development of children and teachers. swanless@pitt.edu

**Patricia A. Crawford,** PhD, is an associate professor of early childhood education and a faculty fellow for the Center of Urban Education at the University of Pittsburgh. A former primary grade teacher, Trish’s research focuses on children’s literature and literacy learning. pcrawfor@pitt.edu

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