

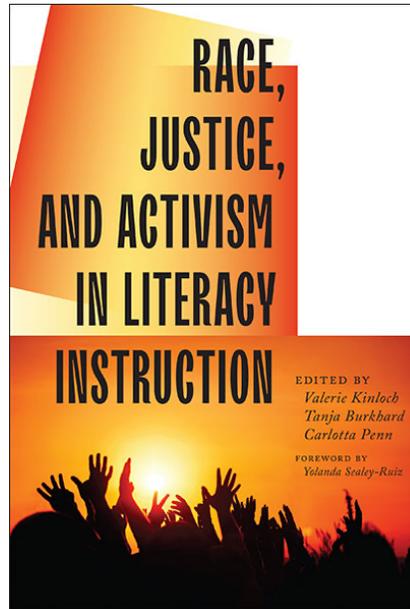
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JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE & LITERACY EDUCATION

*Review of Race, justice, and activism in literacy  
instruction*

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Kinloch, V., Burkhard, T., & Penn, C. M. (Eds.). (2020). *Race, Justice, and Activism in Literacy Instruction*. Teachers College Press.

ISBN: 9780807763216

## A Year Characterized by Civil Unrest

In a time of civil unrest and racial trauma following the deaths of George Floyd, Ahmaud Aubury, Breonna Taylor and Rayshard Brooks, confronting racism in the classroom has become central if not necessary in all American classrooms. Published in 2020, and in the midst of a global pandemic, regular protests, and civil unrest for the past six months, Kinloch, Burkhard and Penn's *Race, Justice, and Activism in Literacy Instruction* serves as much needed guidepost from several social justice leaders in the educational field. Through essays from these notable scholars in education, Kinloch, et al. focus on the intersection among the three: race, justice, and activism, in order to inform the reader of the current scholarship involving the literacy classroom.

In two parts, the editors begin by including works by notable scholars such as Leigh Patel, Detra Price-Dennis, and Tamara Butler, all who question the changing nature of literacy instruction. In Part II, the authors seem to focus more on the implementation of these changes through the work of scholars such as Donja Thomas, Gerald Campano, and Grace Player. Each article ends with reflective questions and both parts end with poetry musings from the editors, titled "Remembering Our Black Youth/ Our Black Lives" and "Where do we go from here?" Through all the authors' experiences with activism and the classroom, the reader gains an accurate idea of what the pressing needs of today's students are as well as how to engage students in anti-racist work that engages with issues surrounding race, justice, and activism. Butler, Penn, and Merry (2020) explain "revolutionary civics" as they pose a central question that I think seems to guide the overall research in the book, "What needs to happen inside schools in relation to race, justice, and activism in literacy education?" (p. 103).

## Teacher Activism

Many scholars have grappled with teacher activism within the classroom as well as overall, most research supports a need for teachers and students to engage in public writing and civil discourse which disrupts aspects of race, justice, and activism (Mirra and Morrell 2011; Mills, et al. 2019, and Picower 2013). Likely inspired by Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, teachers who align with this positioning, view teaching as political and cite neutrality as a means to assist the oppressor. With this framing, engaging in this type of work within a classroom context is often known as a version of civic engagement, advocacy, or activism through "reflexive dialogic processes of becoming disruptive" (Butler, Penn, and Merry, p.103).

Similar to the writers in *Race, Justice, and Activism in Literacy Instruction*, Ervin (1997) frames her writing classroom as compared to a bowling team as she wrestles with the complexities of student activism vs. encouraging students to be "involved citizens" (p. 384). In Singer and Shaugury's work (2005), the authors develop a program which they call, "Stirring Up Justice" in which their mission is to "provide multiple perspectives for students to understand and define activism" (p. 321). Parallel to *Race, Justice, and Activism in Literacy Instruction*, the authors demonstrate this through their work in classrooms which centers activism as a lens. Similarly, Wile (2000) volunteers as a teacher educator for the Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking Project which provides strategies for teachers that "aim to help students listen to the ideas of others, not merely out of polite tolerance, but to value diverse opinions for the potential they offer of enriching our understanding of complex issues" (p. 173). These lessons are all important in understanding the activist positioning of English Language Arts classrooms.

### **Scholar Activists**

Similar to the writers in *Race, Justice, and Activism in Literacy Instruction*, Bree Picower (2012, 2013) as a scholar focuses on issues of race, racism, and education. In Picower, B. (2012), she defines teacher activism as a vision for social justice, and in Picower, B. (2013), the author demonstrates how teachers change once they begin to view teaching as political. Similarly, Mirra and Morrell (2011) apply teacher activist identities to their experience working with the Council of Youth Research which seeks to provide a supportive environment for students to critically research their own schools and communities. Through this research, the authors advocate for teachers as public intellectuals with civic agency and empowerment (p. 419). Mills, Gale, Parker, Smith, and Cross (2019) study activist dispositions for social justice in an effort to describe varying degrees or conceptions of teacher activism based on their observations of teacher practice. Similar to *Race, Justice, and Activism in Literacy Instruction*, the majority of the studies within this book include activism as part of a teacher's identity.

### **Inspiration from experienced professionals**

Through *Race, Justice, and Activism in Literacy Instruction*, readers will gain inspiration from experienced professionals in a variety of positions within the educational field. Some of the strengths of this work include that it draws from experience and research done by quality teachers and researchers in Teacher Education. The topics that each researcher studies weave together to make an overall argument about the necessity of teacher activism. Each writer has a certain tone of importance as well as encouragement. Often there is debate about whether or not teaching is political or what responsibility do teachers have in forming student political identities. This argument might alienate some scholars who disagree with this approach. However, the way the book is written,

with actual classroom experiences along with well-researched bibliographies, this should all suggest otherwise.

### **Today's Classroom Teacher**

The critical work of race, justice, and activism is extremely pertinent to today's world and to today's classroom teacher. All over the world it seems as though race, justice, and activism are intersecting on the streets in locations such as Israel, Belarus or Hong Kong, all cities which have had riots and protests in recent years. In the streets of the United States, the year this book was published, Americans rioted in the streets, tear gas has been used on these Americans, and protestors as well as police officers have been killed as a result. The authors in this book recognize the microcosm of what exists in the world which plays out in the classroom, and so, not only do the authors confront challenging topics in each essay, each writer provides a unique perspective through hands-on, real-world approaches to pedagogy.

Through my reading of *Race, Justice, and Activism in Literacy Instruction*, the pertinence found within these pages were a confirmation of my experiences teaching since 2005. As a white educator, who has taught in a variety of schools, I have encountered different aspects of racism and activism which intersect in the classroom. Overall, I have found that it takes deep listening as well as quick, resolute decision making to handle the many topics that emerge within today's classrooms. For example, it is estimated that the average teacher makes 15,000 educational decisions per day (teachervision.com). Consequently, many teachers must regularly decide what stance to take on various issues quickly as well as they must plan how to integrate critical thinking on these topics productively. Often this is why many teachers see their work as activist in nature or they might participate in activism with their students

through the types of projects described in Kinloch, et al. (2020). In this way, schools can provide quality learning spaces that engage with race, justice, and activism, and teachers everywhere could create counter-spaces to the chaos of the world, through examples of kindness in communities of learning, or the opposite of what Kirkland (2016) describes many literacy classrooms exist as “states of confinement” (p. 467). Instead, I hope that all teachers will challenge themselves to engage within each student’s pedagogical third space (Kirkland, 2016; Gutiérrez, 2008), and as Kirkland suggests, teachers should aim “to teach literacy as a way to promote freedom and free-thinking individuals capable of transforming their communities and abolishing the multiple states of confinement that bind so many of us to the palings of inopportunity” (p. 469). This goal is bold but should be one that we can all work towards.

### **A World Not Yet Born**

In Part II, Burkhard shifts to reimagining through inspiration from Robert Kelly who states, “in the

reflections of activists, we discover the many different cognitive maps of the future, of the world not yet born” (2020, p. 109). One thing a global pandemic and the consequent trauma of 2020 has made clear to me, it is time for many more changes to come. One poster from the nonprofit design lab, Amplifier published in response to this year which has been particularly striking to me, is that, if we get this right, nothing will ever be the same. (2020). Most likely, the authors in Kinloch, et al. would agree that teachers have a tremendous opportunity to impact the world and to influence students for the future. For this reason and more, understanding about these intersections of race, justice, and activism in the literacy instruction is essential in creating a better world, the best one we can imagine, or a world not yet born. In *Race, Justice, and Activism in Literacy Instruction*, readers gain advice and ideas from experienced educators on how to begin doing this much needed work of which the world is in desperate need.

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