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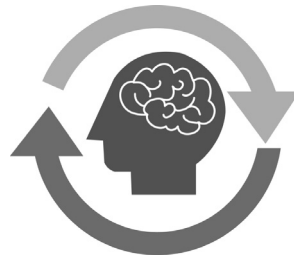
# Learning to Teach Reading Across Racial Contexts: A Focus on Transforming Teacher Mindsets

by David E. Kirkland, Ph.D.

“By the time they enter adolescence, they have contended with more terror than most of us confront in a lifetime . . . They have lived with fear and witnessed death . . . But they have also played baseball, and gone on dates and shot marbles and kept diaries. For, despite all they have seen and done, they are—and we must constantly remind ourselves of this, still children.”  
—Kotlowitz, 1991, p. xi

On November 17, 1999, a Michigan jury found 13 year-old Nathaniel Abraham guilty of second-degree murder for a killing committed when Abraham was 11. At the time, the young African American boy was believed to be the youngest American ever charged and convicted of murder as an adult. Abraham’s fate reflects the longstanding tendency of some people in our society to view Black children through the deficit prism of racial and developmental bias—a lens through which Black childhood, and by association, Black innocence, wash away in the (il)logics of hidden prejudice.

Such prejudice is often cloaked in “polite” and race-neutral rhetoric. For example, numerous media accounts in the case of Abraham used sensational turns of phrase such as “adult crime equals adult time” to justify the erasure of Black childhood innocence. In the American imagination, scholars have long argued that skin argues as convincingly as words, where race conditions one’s perceptions of childhood, personhood, and innocence. A recent report from the Human Rights Watch found that in the State of Florida, for instance, 12,000 children—a disproportionate number of whom are Black—have been moved from the juvenile to adult court system in the past five years. While they make up 27% of those who enter Florida’s juvenile justice system, Black boys account for more than half of all transfers to the adult system.



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Florida is not alone in this tragic *adulthood and criminalization* of Black childhoods. In Cook County, Illinois, Black boys are far more likely than White boys to be tried as adults in criminal courts. The Juvenile Justice Initiative reports that, although only 44% of the children in Cook County are Black, 83% of its juveniles tried as adults were Black. This consistent scripting of Black innocence as Black guilt is not unique to the American criminal justice system, yet it is part and parcel of the American consciousness, maintained through elaborate but hard to decipher discursive tactics that work to legitimize narratives that mark Black children as less innocent (cf. de Certeau, Giard, & Mayol, 1998; Smitherman & van Dijk, 1988).

A disturbing number of Americans, including reading teachers, also fail to see Black children as children (cf. Alexander, 2008; Goff, Jackson, Di Leone, Culotta, & DiTomasso, 2014; Hill, 2016). The language ascribed to them tends to frame Black children as older and more threatening as opposed to youthful and innocent (cf. Fordham, 1993; Goff et al., 2014; Majors & Bilson, 1993), as this article will illustrate. Thus, in our quest for equity in literacy education, we must examine and interrupt how literacy (reading) teachers also engage in practices that strip Black children of innocence. There is evidence that disparities in student (literacy) achievement are linked to such teacher biases (Skiba et al., 2011). That is, students for whom teachers hold contempt based on the color of their skins are less likely to “read” as proficiently as their more valued peers (Kirkland, 2011; Sealey-Ruiz & Greene, 2015).

In this article, I map pathways for moving beyond the study of reading instruction as dealing only with discrete language arts skills and competencies. In this article, I seek to understand the mindsets of reading teachers—the orders of thinking that influence relational spaces of pedagogical practice—that govern language and literacy teaching and learning. It is in this relational space where systems of chronic disparities drive systemic inequities in literacy education and beyond (Kirkland, 2011; 2013). Thus, to advance equity in reading education, it is imperative that the field begins to raise a set of pertinent questions as to how literacy teacher education might focus on reimagining teacher mindsets and, thus, our national consciousness on (Black) innocence. This refocusing of literacy, I argue, is fundamental to the process of eliminating reading disparities and promoting reading proficiency among our most vulnerable youth. That is, how might the study of bias in the teaching of literacy help reading teachers reframe their mindsets so that all youth can exist in their innocence and be understood in their proper developmental context in reading classrooms? How might literacy research and practice promote interventions aimed at transforming teacher mindsets in ways that challenge systemic disparities in education (e.g., in suspensions, special education placements, achievement, opportunity, etc.) shaped and sustained by hidden racial biases?

In seeking to answer these questions, this article explores how literacy teacher education can benefit from examining distortions of teachers' perceptions around Black childhoods with hopes of interrupting the racial inclinations that might warp teachers' perceptions of children of color. In this light, I hope to highlight how a more compassionate approach to literacy education can help literacy educators overcome conditions/conditionings that cause them to overestimate the age and culpability of some students based solely on race and usually at the expense of otherwise capable young Black readers.

## A Question of Innocence

A particular critique of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement<sup>1</sup> is helpful for understanding the dilemma of race in reading development; that is, the dominant narrative of framing Black life as less valuable than White life. For decades, this critique outlined the evocative work of Black novelists such as Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright (1954/2000), who maintained a search for humanizing innocence as leitmotif against the erasure of justice for the maligned/invisibilized Black body. Critical social theorists such as bell hooks (2004) have also described the role of race in shaping a mainstream narrative around race and development that corresponds with this tension surrounding race and innocence. While White boys enjoy compassion and mercy, hooks and others (e.g., Stevenson, 2015) suggest Black boys are often feared though admired, made objects of sexual fantasy though envied, but rarely are they loved (hooks, 2004).

This complex emotional amalgam brings into linear focus the peculiar social gaze through which the Black body becomes socially legible (cf. DuBois, 2008). Thus, in the pedagogical process, it is this gaze, what Foucault (1979) calls “panoptic,” that (e)races the innocence of Black children (see also Morrison, 2007). Foucault sees this panopticism in “a society in which individuals are increasingly caught up in systems of power in and through which visibility is a key means of social control” (Elliott, 2007, p. 89). For hooks (2004), the gaze has immediate consequences when fixed upon young Black men and boys:

Black males [for instance] are utterly disenfranchised in almost every arena of life in the United States, and they often find that the assertion of sexist domination is their only expressive access to the patriarchal power they are told all men should possess as their gendered birthright. (p. 110)

Being boy/young man is important here, as the innocence of Black boyhood rapidly evaporates in the public

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<sup>1</sup>For more information about Black Lives Matter, see <http://blacklivesmatter.com/>.

imagination (Dumas, 2016). In some ways, the systems of oppression they are born into accelerate their psycho-sociological development (or at least their interpretive performances of adulthood) (see Majors & Billson, 1993). Just as the essence of innocence for Black children disappears into the vacuums of social bias, these same Black children, and in hooks's case Black boys, can internalize the gaze through which their innocence disappears. Black boys, for example, live in worlds that place on them over-pronounced versions of masculinity (Kirkland, 2013), what Black feminist scholars have termed "hypermasculinities" (Hooks, 2004). Through this image of Black maleness, Black boys are perceived by others—and sometimes see themselves—as far more sexual and criminal, yet far less human and deserving of compassion and what Stevenson (2015) has called "just mercy" than their White peers (Goff et al., 2014).

Armour's (1997) concept of "negrophobia"—the fear of Black people—is useful here for understanding the dominant, though irrational, denial of Black innocence. For Armour, the Black child from birth on, when seen through the peculiar "negrophobic" gaze, becomes a site of corruption (see also DuBois, 1903). The gaze has been portrayed in such texts as Alex Kotlowitz's *There Are No Children Here* (1991), his bestselling account of a group of children living in the projects of the then crumbling Henry Horner Homes located on Chicago's Westside. Though he was writing about the hardships of urban Black life in the backdrop of the gang and crack epidemics that ripped through Chicago in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Kotlowitz succeeded in revealing a persistent alchemy of bias that mixed race and terror. Thus, the combination of race and terror conjured guilt mythologies that White onlookers levied onto their Black neighbors, regardless of age, as the onlookers passed by from a distance while riding Chicago's well-known "EL." In Kotlowitz's case, the gaze transformed innocent children into less innocent adults. Education scholars have suggested that the same fictive perceptions that inform bias play out in reading

classrooms also, where children of color—particularly Black children—find themselves disciplined more frequently and more harshly than other children their age (Noguera & Blankstein, 2015). Racial bias and reading proficiency are linked, the consequence of which drives disproportionalities in reading achievement and the statistical disparities that grow the more students experience schooling (cf. Milner, Allen, & McGee, 2015; Skiba et al., 2011).<sup>ii</sup>

### **Teaching Teachers (After) Trayvon: Transforming Teacher Mindsets in Literacy Education**

If the teaching of literacy only dealt with the "neutral" presentation of facts, the facilitation of language, or even the dictation of rules, the event of psycho-sociological violence to Black youths' innocence in classrooms would, perhaps, be tempered. However, at the base of all teaching practices are belief structures (or mindsets) that govern ideas and facts, how information is presented and received, and how teachers relate to students (see Bourdieu, 1980). Thus, mindsets influence the teaching of topics, seemingly uncontroversial, and everyday discursive interactions, as well as the teaching of skills and competencies such as reading (cf. Dweck, 2006). In this light, the teaching of reading doesn't begin with language or words, but with a set of complex relationships between individuals—teachers and students. Our roles in such relationships depend on positionings and perceptions, on how individuals understand the world, themselves and others in the world. Noguera (2008) has found in the case of Black and Latino boys, for example, vulnerable children are doubly trapped by gender and racial stereotypes that inappropriately age them and, thus, undermine their cognitive, social, and emotional capacities and needs, which also prevent them from getting the support they need to thrive. To consider the effects of bias in the teaching of reading we can ask: Who gets to be innocent, and how might we reframe teacher mindsets

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<sup>ii</sup>Black girls are six times more likely than White girls to be suspended (Crenshaw, Ocen, & Chung, 2015). Black males are six times more likely than White males to be remediated or placed into special education (Monroe, 2005). All students of color are more likely to be labeled a "problem" or "at risk" (Dumas, 2016).

in ways that dissolve their biases as it relates to innocence? Addressing these questions might provide a way forward in literacy education, especially in places where teachers “read” and “write” students, that is perceive them and shape them based on their perceptions, as they teach students to read and write.

Further, if the idea of childhood is a racially contested idea, then our conceptions of childhood in literacy education cannot be racially neutral. It cannot be racially neutral particularly in light of current events—the deaths of children such as Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, Aiyana Jones, and what feels like an unending list of others. Perceptions of students of color as problems manifest in pedagogical rifts that lead to structural violence, harassment, and even discrimination at individual and systemic levels (Dumas, 2016; Emdin, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Thus, part of learning to teach reading must include a transformation in teacher mindsets. It is here that I have questioned what might move literacy education beyond the racial politics of innocence/guilt to a place of compassion for all students:

- How might we take a deeper look within literacy teaching, beyond books and basics, to begin to examine the textual ideologies at work when youth identities get read and written, thus unevenly cast in literacy education?
- How do literacy teachers read their students as texts—interpreting them as either more or less innocent based on race?

To address these questions, I worked with a group of 50 ELA teachers over the course of four professional development sessions in the fall of 2015. I focus, here, on ELA teachers because I have found that both acts of moving beyond and moving deeper into bias deal with acts of literacy, or “reading” and “writing.” My goal in the sessions was to provide systematic anti-bias support necessary for advancing a more compassionate literacy pedagogy that might affirm and “culturally sustain” all students (Kirkland, 2013; Paris, 2012). By compassionate I mean a humanizing approach to literacy education sympathetic to all students. To be sympathetic, literacy educators must be capable of engaging students in developmentally appropriate ways—in ways that affirm

their innocence as opposed to obscuring it. Thus, a more compassionate literacy pedagogy begins with the teacher, and more specifically with teacher mindsets, disentangling the politics of innocence so that the virtues of youth become legible regardless of a child’s racial/ethnic background.

In the process of the professional development sessions, my primary objective was to help reposition teacher perspectives on innocence as pertaining to students of color with hopes of shattering (implicit and explicit) biases against students of color. I used literature as an opportunity to expose, collectively reflect upon, and inquire into my participants’ mindsets. The program participants were all literacy educators from a major Northeastern city in the United States. They all taught in classrooms that ranged from fourth to twelfth grade. Their students were generally diverse, though majority (70%) Black and Latino. The teachers were also diverse in both age (23-52) and experience (one to 19 years of teaching). As a whole, this group of teachers was comprised mostly of women (~75%), and roughly half of the teachers identified as White; the other half as Latina/o (22%), Black (20%), Asian (5%), and other (3%).

In our professional development sessions, I used students’ pictures, short stories, and newspaper clippings about Trayvon Martin to help teachers develop greater compassion for their non-White students. This approach to teacher development has been shown to build teachers’ understandings, empathy, respect, and trust within and across communities while lessening teacher biases with respect to students’ race and age (Kirkland, 2014). The basic premise of the approach suggests that rereading the violence of and against children of color can itself be an intervention that can transform consciousness and help teachers (re) imagine the innocence of students whom they might prematurely age and assign guilt. Teaching Trayvon and stories of children of color like him helped me develop ELA teachers as listeners, framed within a broader tradition of care and compassion meant to interrupt the numerous problems associated with what Way and colleagues (Way, Reddy, & Rhodes, 2007) call “a crisis of compassion” (e.g., disparity, violence, discrimination).

## Critical Issues: Essential Practices for Literacy - Learning to Teach Reading Across Racial Contexts: A Focus on Transforming Teacher Mindsets

The professional development series was developed to address large-scale problems of mindset as a crucial yet foundational aspect of literacy teaching and student learning. The logic is that learning to read requires teaching that is compassionate. In literacy education (and perhaps in most disciplines), mindset influences all activity as well as non-cognitive socio-relational cues that influence learning and behavior (Bourdieu, 1980; Dweck, 2006; Spitzer & Aronson, 2015). My teacher participants and I examined mindsets as a fundamental ELA apparatus, as part of the teaching of ELA (as opposed to separate from it), and as both (meta) content and analytical frame. That is, teachers were asked to think about what and how they thought, and use this reflective practice to engage in a practice of (re)discovering their students as acknowledged through their hidden beliefs.

Thus, mindset, for us, was understood as pretext for rendering and receiving *texts* and the related *subtexts* of students' identities and the meanings ascribed to them based on how one might ascribe meaning to race (cf. Kirkland, 2013). It also acted as a lens for reading and writing words/worlds, where young characters of color, in literature for example, have been often (mis)understood in a light that leaves them less innocent than White youth characters (cf. Morrison, 2007). Such stories became thought experiments, places where teachers could safely and meaningfully think about, reflect upon, and reframe how they perceived students across difference.

Similar to how I have characterized the racialized body as a text often aged and judged as possessing an inherent narrative of innocence or guilt, I began our professional development series by asking teachers to bring a picture of a student from their class whom they deem "least innocent." This activity happened early in the process, after introductions, ground rules, and team building/trust exercises. As part of this "photo-text" experiment we posted pictures on walls, forming a gallery of many faces upon which to reflect. After pictures were posted, participants roamed the gallery, looking specifically for patterns that emerged across the images. After they had walked around the room, I

asked the teachers to predict the age of the students in the pictures. We then debriefed the experience based on questions I posed:

- What do you notice about the pictures?
- What do they have in common, and how might they differ?
- What do they tell us about our collective and individual experiences with students?
- What ages would you guess for the students?
- What do they tell us about students and innocence?
- What might they tell us about ourselves and our perceptions of innocence?

The teachers noted a glaring gender pattern: most of the students in their pictures were boys (about 90%). They went on to explain how boys are socialized to be more aggressive than girls, that their problems stem from "mannish behaviors," or based on the idea that they were "acting like they were grown." However, the teachers did not point out the intersectional reality that over 80% of the students pictured were also Black. When it came to guessing students' ages, they over-estimated by an average of 2.5 years, and 3 years for Black males. By contrast, they underestimated the ages of White students by an average of 1.2 years.

I began our debriefing process with this observation: that essentially a random group of teachers, diverse in age, race, and somewhat by gender, all regarded students of color as less innocent than White students the same age. These teachers' readings of their "least innocent" students became the basis for further exploration around questions of race and development in subsequent meetings. In later meetings, we began to examine race and development through stories and news clippings, particularly those about Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Tamir Rice—Black youth labeled by their murderers, as more dangerous and less innocent than they actually were.

During our next meeting, I wanted teachers to examine alternative ways to explore the innocence of children of color. I also wanted them to experience a counter-narrative, a more humanizing lens for viewing children

of color. We examined Langston Hughes's short story "Thank you, M'am" (1958), exploring the compassion one character (Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones) shows to another (Roger). The story gave us an opportunity to begin to re-theorize perspectives on race, youth, and innocence through the lens of a loving and compassionate stranger. In the story, Langston Hughes narrates a moral tale of a young Black boy (Roger) who, while running down the street, snatches a woman's (Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones's) purse. A chase ensues. Roger trips and stumbles to the ground. Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones jerks him up by his shirt collar, and holds onto him until she gets him home to "wash his face." After Roger's face is washed, Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones prepares a meal, suggesting that Roger must've been hungry "to steal someone's pocketbook." Roger is blinded by her compassion. He is hungry too. The two sit and have a meal together. Roger is quiet, but Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones breaks the silence with a question. Why did he try to steal her purse? The answer was simple. He wanted a pair of \$10 blue suede shoes. After they talk and eat and talk some more, they begin to walk towards the door. But before she lets him leave, Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones reaches into her "pocketbook" and pulls out \$10. She gives it to Roger so that he can buy some blue suede shoes. After she gives him the money, she instructs:

And next time, do not make the mistake of latching onto my pocketbook nor nobody else's—because shoes come by devilish ways will burn your feet. I got to get my rest now. But I wish you would behave yourself, son, from here on in. (Hughes, 1958)

She then leads Roger down the hall to the front door and opens it. "Good-night! Behave yourself, boy!" she says, looking out into the street. Roger wants to say something other than, "Thank you, m'am" to Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones. But he can only barely manage to say, "Thank you" before she shuts the door. He never sees her again.

During our conversation about the text, the teachers and I put race and development in full relief by exploring questions about Mrs. Luella Bates Washington

Jones' reactions: Were they right? Why did she do what she did? The teachers responded to these questions with consensus: "She was right;" "she did what she did because Roger was only a *boy*, wanting shoes." The next question I asked dealt with race: If Roger were White would it have made a difference? Most teachers said, "No." But one teacher said, "Yes. If he were White, I don't think he would have had to steal money to buy shoes." Another teacher chimed in, "[Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones] saw Roger as a boy. That was enough for her to love him, to forgive him, to take time out of her life to teach him a better way." In discussing the politics of race and childhood, the teachers were drawing conclusions about other sociopolitical realities that skew perspectives on Black childhood. Placed in conversation with their pictures, "Thank You, M'am" allowed the teachers to compare their own acts of compassion. One teacher concluded, "I wonder how [much] more loved and engaged [the student] in my picture would feel if I had compassion like Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones."

During the last two days, we examined media texts, exploring how race and innocence were constructed in the case of Trayvon Martin. In doing so, we placed Trayvon in conversation with Roger and the students in the teachers' pictures. While discussing similarities, some teachers began to realize the distorted ways they were reading bodies of color. By the end of the experience, the teachers all felt convicted; each admitted to prematurely aging and, in some ways, vilifying students of color. However, each of them also admitted to having little conscious recognition of the disparities in perception that were playing out daily in their classrooms. They also never linked those disparities in perception to disparities in students' reading proficiency.

Notwithstanding, these interactions and conversations about race and innocence suggest that literacy teachers can move past their prejudices and cultivate greater compassion for students, that the teaching of reading might begin with the teaching of the reading teacher. Research suggests that teachers can become more compassionate by engaging habits of introspection, closely delving into the biases that fetishize children of color

as hyper-mature (Way et al., 2007). Research has also shown that we, as humans, are inherently empathic and cooperative social beings; however, we need supportive relationships and connected communities to allow such drives to thrive (Spitzer & Aronson, 2015). Thus, our capacity for empathy and mutual understanding advances beyond the hold of stereotypes when those mindsets are confronted. Transforming mindsets, then, calls for a reformulation of the commonly accepted hierarchy of needs that places our social, emotional, and relational needs at the base rather than in the center of the hierarchy. When these social, emotional, and relational needs and capacities are not nurtured, negative consequences for the children we teach, which include mental and physical health problems, and social and structural violence, grow worse.

Stereotypes about race, gender, class, religion, nationality, sexual identity, and so on, disconnect and divide teachers from their students. In literacy education, if not education in general, it creates a crisis of compassion directly tied to a mismatch between who students of color are and who their teachers perceive them to be. My work with ELA teachers in the professional development series highlighted above underscores the potential for a resolution, one that is not ideologically driven, but rather rooted in our common humanity and shaped by our capacity for empathy, caring, and cooperation.

## Teaching Reading Across Racial Contexts

To teach reading across racial contexts, literacy education must take up a pre-pedagogical question of compassion. Compassion is a lens through which we perceive our collective humanity differently. Thus, a pedagogy of compassion might allow us to write innocence back into our troubled perceptions of color. By pedagogy, I do not simply mean the practice of teaching, but also those delicate leanings and interactions tied to our beliefs. By literacy education, I only partially intend to mean the learning that happens in and around literacy spaces loosely associated with acts of reading and writing. By literacy education, I do, however, mean something akin to what Morrell (2009) calls “powerful literacy,” the reception and production

of things in and beyond the imagination, brought into social reality from realms of unconsciousness hidden in the vastness of experience and all that comes with it as a way of challenging the existing order of things.

The evidence suggests that perceptions of the essential nature of childhood can be affected by race, and for Black children, this has meant a loss of protection that other children enjoy. With the average age overestimation for Black boys, for example, exceeding four-and-a-half years, in some cases, “Black children may be viewed as adults when they are just 13 years old” (Goff et al., 2014, p. 541). We must start here with perception, examining the need for a pedagogy for greater compassion in the teaching of reading because compassion might provide a treatment to transform the racial (il)logics that skew mindsets and reify invisible systems of bias that maintain the oppression of Black and Brown bodies, even and particularly when they are young (Stevenson, 2015).

What I am proposing is, in essence, a paradigm shift in literacy education, transferring the focus of instruction from skills, content, and capacities to relationships; from disparity and discrimination and additional challenges in school to a focus on our needs and capacities as human beings to bridge empathic, cooperative, and social gaps that hinder literacy learning and development. Broadening the scope enables us to make an impact on educational transactions by transforming the context in which they take place. To put it simply, a pedagogy for greater compassion, where literacy teachers affirm the innocence of all students equally, starts with a teacher seeing and listening to all students, particularly our most castigated students, so that trust, respect, and understanding are enhanced among and between teacher and student, which I believe is prerequisite to reimagining learning to read across racial contexts

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## Author Biography

**Dr. David E. Kirkland** is the Executive Director of The Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and The Transformation of Schools, and professor of English and Urban Education at New York University. He has been described as an activist and educator, cultural critic and author. A leading national scholar and advocate for educational justice, Dr. Kirkland's transdisciplinary scholarship explores a variety of equity related topics: school climate and discipline; school integration and choice; culture and education; vulnerable learners; and intersections among race, gender, and literacy. With many groundbreaking publications to his credit, he has analyzed the cultures, languages, and texts of urban youth, using quantitative, critical literary, ethnographic, and sociolinguistic research methods to answer complex questions at the center of equity and social justice education. Dr. Kirkland taught middle and high school for several years in Michigan. He's also organized youth empowerment and youth mentoring programs for over a decade in major U.S. cities such as Detroit, Chicago and New York. He currently leads efforts to enhance education options for vulnerable youth throughout New York City and beyond. He can be reached at [dk64@nyu.edu](mailto:dk64@nyu.edu).