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There Are Many Englishes: Decolonial Approaches to Early Childhood Literacy

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Abstract

The current education policy climate in the U.S. is marked by English-only legislation and reductive, politicized interpretations of the "science of reading" (SOR) which have placed early childhood educators under pressure to adopt rigid, decontextualized models of literacy instruction. The science of reading has traditionally been viewed as a cognitive, skills-based approach to literacy instruction. However, decolonial perspectives challenge this framing by advocating for a more holistic approach that includes children's funds of knowledge, especially for children who experience multiple, intersecting forms of marginalization and who speak various Englishes. With a balanced literacy approach, this article critically examines the science of reading framework, specifically the "big five" components—phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension—through the lens of oral storytelling and pluralistic children's picture books. Drawing on decolonial literacy practices, we propose an integrated approach to literacy instruction that centers the cultural and linguistic resources of multilingual children, immigrant children, and children of Color. We argue for a reimagining of the science of reading to prioritize multilingual, multimodal, and culturally responsive strategies that promote equitable learning environments. This approach seeks to repair the historical harms caused by exclusionary policies and practices and supports restorative justice in early literacy education.

1. Introduction

Recent English-only policies in the United States intensify longstanding pressures for linguistic assimilation and threaten the educational opportunities of multilingual, immigrant, and Indigenous children (McCarty & Nicholas, 2014; Rahman & Hu, 2026; The White House, 2025). These policies reinforce the ideology that a one standardized form of English is superior. At the same time, the public discourse surrounding the *science of reading* (SOR) has sometimes narrowed interdisciplinary reading research into a set of political mandates and scripted curricula disconnected from children's cultural and linguistic lives (Aukerman & Chambers Schuldt, 2021).

Evidence-based reading instruction is essential, but the uptake of SOR—not the research itself—has often prioritized compliance over responsiveness. Rigid implementations can overlook bilingual development, translanguaging, oral language traditions, and community-based literacies that support multilingual children's learning (Ascenzi-Moreno, 2018; García & Kleifgen, 2010; McLean et al., 2026).

Researchers describe English as diverse, shaped by culture, history, migration, and identity (Khany & Beigi, 2024). Yet early literacy curricula, assessments, and interventions often privilege white mainstream English. These practices can reproduce raciolinguistic hierarchies that position multilingual children and speakers of Black Language as deficient (Baker-Bell, 2020; Flores & Rosa, 2015). These hierarchies are often reproduced under the guise of *neutral* reading science. Assessments grounded in standardized norms can similarly disadvantage children who speak other Englishes (Ojochegbe, 2024).

To address these inequities, we draw on raciolinguistic theory and culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) to consider how literacy instruction can integrate foundational reading skills with oral storytelling and pluralistic picturebooks. Our approach affirms children's Englishes, multilingual histories, and racialized linguistic identities while making explicit instruction meaningful and responsive. Research has documented the educational value of bilingual and multilingual learning (Ascenzi-Moreno, 2018; Flynn et al., 2021; Souto-Manning, 2016); our focus is how these commitments can inform early literacy teaching.

Early childhood literacy has long been shaped by debates about phonics and meaning making. Structured phonics instruction is important, and research also underscores the value of incorporating children's cultural and linguistic identities into literacy practices (Brinegar et al., 2024; Paris & Alim, 2017). Decolonial frameworks call educators to move beyond Eurocentric literacy paradigms and recognize oral storytelling and picture books as meaningful parts of literacy learning (Crawford et al., 2024; Eizadirad & Wane, 2023; García & Wei, 2015; Kuhn et al., 2024)

A balanced literacy approach combines authentic literacy experiences with focused, explicit instruction, including modeling, explanation, and targeted mini-lessons, in areas such as decoding and comprehension (Fisher et al., 2023; Wharton-McDonald et al., 1997). It can embed systematic phonics instruction within thematic learning that uses authentic texts, read alouds, guided and shared reading, and independent reading and writing (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). We extend this approach through decolonial practices that recognize learners' linguistic and cultural resources.

2. Decolonizing the Science of Reading: Literature Review

The science of reading has drawn attention to the cognitive and neurological processes involved in learning to read (Seidenberg, 2017). In this article, we consider how a balanced literacy approach can teach *the big five* components associated with the science of reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000)—through oral storytelling and pluralistic children's picture books. Building on Ḥaj Yaḥya (2021), we use the term "pluralistic picture books" to describe books that center or include multiple cultures, ethnicities, languages, identities, or social justice perspectives. Such books offer varied voices, traditions, and experiences, inviting children to encounter perspectives beyond a single dominant viewpoint.

Additionally, we argue that it is essential to teach the *big five* components of reading—phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension—as developmentally appropriate practices in early childhood education. Utilizing a developmental approach ensures that early literacy instruction aligns with how young children naturally learn. Research shows that children acquire language and literacy most effectively through interactive, playful, and meaningful experiences that are rooted in their cultural and linguistic contexts (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Rand & Morrow, 2021). When balanced literacy instruction is designed around children's developmental stages, interests, and cultural knowledge, it supports both academic growth and a positive self-identity as a learner (Duke & Cartwright, 2021).

Developmentally appropriate early literacy practices also emphasize the role of social interaction, oral language, and hands-on exploration. According to Vygotsky (1987), children learn through social engagement with more knowledgeable others, and these interactions form the foundation for literacy learning. For example, phonemic awareness and phonics are best

taught through songs, rhymes, and oral storytelling that involve listening, repeating, and manipulating sounds in context (Yeh & Connell, 2008). Such practices support children in internalizing the patterns in spoken language and to develop phonemic awareness. These approaches are more effective at engaging young learners than isolated worksheets or rote memorization.

Similarly, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension develop most strongly when children engage with rich language experiences that involve conversation, storytelling, and shared reading. Teaching the big five within developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive contexts ensures that all children, especially multilingual learners, have equitable access to early literacy instruction that honors their strengths and supports their long-term success (García & Kleifgen, 2010; López-Robertson, 2021; Souto-Manning, 2016).

While these findings have advanced our understanding of early literacy acquisition, they have also been used to devalue whole language approaches that prioritize meaning-making, context, and sociocultural interactions in literacy development (Gavelek & Bresnahan, 2014; Goodman, 1986; Snowling et al., 2022). Such findings have also led to the exclusion of Indigenous, Black, Latinx, and immigrant children's literacy practices from dominant literacy frameworks such as the science of reading (Mignolo, 2011). Decolonizing early literacy education requires recognizing how children construct meaning through multilingualism, storytelling, and engagement with diverse texts (Gutiérrez et al., 2009; Kuhn et al., 2024). In the sections that follow, we present examples of a balanced literacy approach to teaching the *big five* components outlined by the science of reading (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension) (National Reading Panel, 2000) by integrating oral storytelling and culturally pluralistic children's picture books to decolonize early literacy practices.

3. Methodology

Oral Storytelling and Pluralistic Picture Books as Tools for Decolonizing Literacy Practices

Decolonial approaches to early literacy development emphasize the importance of engaging with diverse knowledge systems, languages, and ways of knowing that have historically been marginalized in mainstream educational contexts (Kuhn et al., 2024). Two powerful tools for implementing decolonial literacy practices are oral storytelling (Nxumalo & Villanueva, 2019) and pluralistic picture books, which offer rich opportunities to center indigenous, local, and non-Western knowledge traditions in the classroom.

Oral Storytelling in Decolonial Literacy Practices

Oral storytelling has long been a method of passing down knowledge, cultural values, and history in many communities worldwide, particularly among Indigenous peoples. In decolonial educational frameworks, oral storytelling is not merely a pedagogical tool but a means of resisting the dominance of written and standardized modes of communication, thereby validating diverse epistemologies (Eizadirad & Wane, 2023). By prioritizing oral traditions, educators encourage children to engage with language in an embodied, relational way that honors the histories and worldviews of their communities (Zapata et al., 2017).

Souto-Manning, Martell, and Álvarez (2024) focus on the importance of "talk" in literacy practices where oral storytelling nurtures children's socio-emotional and cognitive development by fostering empathy, imagination, and critical thinking. It allows young children to connect with stories from their own cultures and experiences while also being exposed to the stories of others. In this way, storytelling serves as a platform for intercultural dialogue, bridging gaps between different cultural contexts, and a means to sustain cultures (Paris, 2021; Piipponen & Karlsson, 2019). When teachers use storytelling as a vehicle for literacy, they can create a space where diverse linguistic practices, such as code-switching and translanguaging,

are validated, thus reflecting the fluidity and richness of children's lived experiences (García & Kleifgen, 2020; García & Wei, 2015).

Decolonial literacy frameworks emphasize that children do not enter the classroom as blank slates. They bring rich oral traditions, such as Hmong folktales passed down through family storytelling, or Caribbean trickster stories told during family gatherings, or Indian folktales like the Jataka tales with moral endings. When educators incorporate these traditions into classroom instruction, they validate students' home languages and identities, and they resist the dominant narrative that privileges only standardized English and print-based texts (Mignolo, 2011; Eizadirad & Wane, 2023).

Pluralistic Picture Books as a Tool for Decolonial Literacy Development

Pluralistic picture books are also invaluable in decolonial literacy development, offering a multimodal approach where children learn through both text and illustration. Well aligned with balanced literacy practices, this is especially vital in diverse early childhood settings where children may be acquiring literacy in multiple languages or navigating varied cultural frameworks (Martinez & Harmon, 2012).

Their decolonial power lies in providing "windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors" (Bishop, 1990), reflecting children's identities (mirrors), exposing them to other cultures (windows), and inviting imaginative engagement (sliding glass doors). These books affirm children's cultural heritage while fostering literacy. For example, stories rooted in Indigenous perspectives or global South communities offer counter-narratives to Western-centered models and broaden what counts as valuable language and knowledge in classrooms (Paris & Alim, 2017).

Culturally responsive literature, like the works of Yuyi Morales, Jacqueline Woodson, and Duncan Tonatiuh, can help children see themselves in texts and encounter diverse worldviews (Bishop, 1990). In the context of World Englishes, such books also challenge hegemonic language norms by incorporating dialects and non-dominant Englishes, including African American Vernacular English, Indigenous languages, and other global varieties (Baker-Bell, 2020; Flores & Rosa, 2023; García & Kleifgen, 2020).

Picture books also strengthen reading comprehension, vocabulary, and critical thinking (Martinez & Harmon, 2012). Yet, early childhood book selections often center dominant narratives and marginalize the lived experiences of multilingual children and children of Color (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Souto-Manning, Martell, & Álvarez, 2024). Oral storytelling and pluralistic picture books can broaden literacy experiences and make space for perspectives often overlooked in narrowly implemented science of reading approaches.

4. Teaching the Big Five Through Oral Storytelling and Pluralistic Picture Books

The *big five* components of literacy instruction—phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension—are widely promoted by the science of reading as essential building blocks for successful reading development (National Reading Panel, 2000). While these elements are grounded in cognitive and neurological research, they are often implemented in rigid ways that overlook the cultural and linguistic diversity of children in today's classrooms. The examples below show how oral storytelling and pluralistic picture books might support explicit, developmentally appropriate, and culturally sustaining instruction.

Phonemic Awareness

Phonemic awareness, which is the ability to identify, blend, segment, and manipulate individual sounds in spoken language, can be developed through stories that emphasize rhyme, rhythm, and alliteration. For example, telling a version of the West African tale Anansi and the Moss-Covered Rock (Young & Ferguson, 1995) allows children to notice repeated phrases and patterns such as "Isn't this a strange moss-covered rock!" As the phrase is repeated, educators can ask students to identify the beginning sounds in "moss" and "rock" and practice isolating

the /m/ and /r/ sounds. This sound play supports children's awareness of phonemes (National Reading Panel, 2000).

In addition, stories like the Navajo Coyote and the Stars (Childrey, 2004) use repetitive structures and culturally rooted vocabulary. Teachers can invite children to listen to the /s/ sound in "stars" and "sky" and clap when they hear the sound. These kinds of interactive, culturally responsive storytelling techniques not only engage children but also draw their attention to the sounds in words.

Shared reading of pluralistic picture books can also connect phonemic awareness to children's cultural and linguistic backgrounds. For instance, in Abuela by Arthur Dorros, the rhythmic use of Spanish and English words, such as "abuela," "avión," and "vamos", can be used to highlight initial sounds and syllables in both languages. Educators might ask children to repeat words aloud, isolate the /v/ sound in "vamos," or match pictures to the beginning sounds they hear. These shared reading experiences integrate meaningful content with explicit sound play, supporting both literacy development and cultural affirmation. By using pluralistic texts that reflect children's identities and languages, teachers make phonemic awareness instruction more inclusive, engaging, and developmentally appropriate.

Phonics

Phonics instruction focuses on relationships between letters and sounds, and oral language can provide a meaningful foundation for this work. For example, in a classroom that includes children who speak Spanish at home, teachers might tell the story of "La Cucarachita Martina," which emphasizes repeated words such as "cucarachita." The teachers can then write down the beginning letter C and the ending letter A to invite children to think about the sounds those letters make in both English and Spanish. By bridging children's home languages and oral storytelling traditions, teachers help children understand how sounds correspond to letters in culturally meaningful ways.

Pluralistic picture books can then extend these oral experiences into print-rich environments. For example, in the book "Abuela" by Arthur Dorros, which weaves English and Spanish throughout the narrative, teachers can pause and highlight words such as "abuela," "sombrero," and "globo" during shared or guided reading experiences. Children can identify the first letter of each word (A, S, and G) and then match them to their sound (/a/, /s/, and /g/). Books like "Jabari Jumps" by Gaia Cornwall and "My Name Is Yoon" by Helen Recorvits offer opportunities to explore common and less common letter-sound patterns through culturally specific names and vocabulary, fostering letter-sound awareness while validating children's linguistic identities.

Teachers can create interactive word-study charts using vocabulary from these books. Children might group words by beginning or ending sounds or by language or origin, then blend and segment sounds in familiar words. These approaches strengthen phonics development while ensuring that instruction is grounded in children's lived experiences and multilingual realities. By doing so, educators shift phonics instruction from isolated drills to meaningful, identity-affirming literacy learning.

Fluency

Oral storytelling offers a rich, developmentally appropriate context for supporting fluency in early literacy (Campbell & Hlusek, 2015; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Fluency (reading with speed, accuracy, and expression) is modeled through storytelling's rhythm, intonation, and voice modulation. Listening to fluent narration helps children internalize prosody, supporting expressive reading and comprehension. When children retell stories, they practice phrasing, word recognition, and narrative flow, enhancing both oral and written fluency. Incorporating cultural storytelling traditions, such as African American call-and-response, Diné (Navajo) creation stories, or Filipino folktales, can therefore serve as engaging, culturally affirming fluency models.

Children's picture books also play a critical role in fluency development by combining visual cues with linguistic input (Kachorsky et al., 2017; Kelly & Kachorsky, 2022; Serafini, 2024). Books with repetitive and predictable texts, like "Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?" or "The Very Hungry Caterpillar," by Eric Carle are routinely adopted by early educators. However, educators should be encouraged to reflect on who their students are and integrate pluralistic picture books that reflect and sustain the cultures and languages of the children they teach.

There are various pluralistic texts that also feature rhythmic, repetitive language that promote choral reading and memorization (Crawford et al., 2024; Strasser & Seplocha, 2007). For instance, the bilingual book "What Can You Do With a Paleta?" by Carmen Tafolla uses repetitive and predictable English and Spanish text and culturally specific language to support the fluency of young readers. Utilizing such texts repeatedly during read-alouds, shared, or guided reading also helps children further internalize expressive patterns and phrasing. The story dialogue can also be encouraged and extended into the pretend play areas and writing workshops of the classroom for repeated practice—further supporting children's fluency in meaningful, joyful, and culturally sustaining ways.

Vocabulary

Vocabulary growth in early childhood is highly dependent on the quantity and quality of language exposure. Oral storytelling is a powerful tool for developing vocabulary. Through rich, culturally grounded narratives, children are exposed to a broad range of words and expressions that may not surface in everyday classroom interactions. For multilingual learners, hearing stories in their home language or in culturally familiar contexts supports both first- and second-language vocabulary acquisition (Cummins, 2005; Souto-Manning, 2016). For example, a Yoruba folktale or a Haitian oral tradition may introduce children to context-specific words, while simultaneously offering opportunities to translate or relate these words to English, promoting cross-linguistic connections (García & Wei, 2015). Storytelling also provides repeated exposure to new vocabulary in meaningful, narrative-driven contexts, which aids retention and comprehension (Wasik & Bond, 2001; Wasik et al., 2016). Importantly, these practices can be included into word study experiences to affirm children's identities and linguistic repertoires, countering deficit perspectives that often position their languages as barriers rather than assets in literacy learning (Gutiérrez et al., 2009). By anchoring vocabulary instruction in oral storytelling that reflects the cultural wealth of the classroom, educators support deep, joyful, and relevant language development.

Pluralistic picture books also introduce children to rich and diverse word banks beyond everyday conversation. For example, compared to adult-child conversation, picture books are more likely to contain more rare words (Larragueta & Ceballos-Viro, 2018). Picture books support repeated exposure to high-quality language, sophisticated vocabulary, varied sentence structures, and narrative conventions that are typically absent in oral conversations. For example, in the book "We Are the Water Protectors" by Carole Lindstrom, readers encounter terms like "black snake," "ancestors," "sacred," and "prophecy," which are rarely heard in everyday conversation with young children but are deeply rooted in cultural, environmental, and spiritual contexts. These words are not only linguistically rich but also embedded in Indigenous worldviews and ecological knowledge, allowing children to connect new vocabulary with meaningful cultural narratives. Through such texts, children develop both receptive and expressive vocabulary while also gaining insight into cultural perspectives and social justice themes, making vocabulary instruction both cognitively rigorous and culturally responsive.

Pluralistic picture books also contain illustrations that provide scaffolding for unfamiliar words, allowing children to infer meanings through visual cues and context. Illustrations not only contextualize new vocabulary but also make abstract concepts more tangible, fostering deeper semantic connections. Similarly, when adults ask open-ended questions and encourage

children to elaborate on picture book content, they facilitate active vocabulary learning (Ceyhan & Yildiz, 2021; Pillinger & Vardy, 2022; Zucker et al., 2021). Additionally, interactive reading practices, such as dialogic reading, in which adults prompt children with questions and expansions, further solidify word meanings and encourage active language use.

Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension, understanding and interpreting text, is the ultimate goal of reading. Pluralistic picture books support children's reading comprehension through exposure to essential story elements such as characters, settings, plots and complimentary illustrations which help children internalize narrative frameworks that support their reading comprehension skills (Gunn et al., 2022; Takacs & Bus, 2018). For example, in the book "The Arabic Quilt: An Immigrant Story" by Aya Khalil, young children learn about the main character (Kanzi) and her desire to fit into the dominant United States culture after recently immigrating from Egypt. Through a read aloud, young children would be able to learn about Kenzi, Kenzi's friends and family, as well as the importance of valuing one's culture and ethnicity, despite the pressures to assimilate to the dominant White culture.

Through various reading experiences (read aloud, guided, shared, or independent) of pluralistic books that have similar themes as "The Arabic Quilt: An Immigrant Story," young children can learn to make predictions, draw inferences, and connect personal experiences to textual content, which are all critical reading comprehension strategies. Illustrations also serve to invite children to infer meaning, anticipate outcomes, and connect ideas, building inferential thinking, which is critical to comprehension. The illustrations in pluralistic picture books are therefore critical elements that support children in creating mental images of the story and their understanding of the story (Boerma et al., 2016; Nicolopoulou et al., 2024). Thus, pluralistic picture books are multimodal tools that not only support children's language and reading skills, but they also support children's critical thinking skills, empathy and anti-bias development, and reaffirm their intersectional self-identities (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2020).

As we have demonstrated, oral storytelling offers a developmentally appropriate, culturally sustaining, and cognitively rich foundation that encourages children to listen closely, play with sounds, and connect language learning with their cultural heritage and lived experiences. Additionally, pluralistic picture books further extend opportunities for meaning making and language development through print. These books play a vital role in fostering fluency, vocabulary acquisition, and reading comprehension by engaging children in rich, culturally grounded texts. The use of pluralistic picture books goes beyond basic skill development—they are central to transforming literacy instruction into a culturally sustaining and socially just practice. The following section explores the practical implications of these strategies and highlights how educators can create inclusive, responsive, and literacy-rich classrooms informed by current research.

5. Implications for Early Childhood Educators: Discussion

Educational research supports the decolonial approaches of using oral storytelling and pluralistic picture books to support literacy in early childhood education. McCarty and Nicholas (2014) highlight the importance of reclaiming Indigenous languages and literacies in schools and call for educational practices that honor Indigenous storytelling as a method for language revitalization and cultural transmission. Additionally, Eizadirad and Wane (2023) provide a decolonial perspective on how storytelling can be used to challenge mainstream literacy pedagogies that exclude Indigenous and other marginalized voices. They assert that engaging with storytelling and oral traditions allows children to experience literacy as a dynamic, social practice rather than a static set of skills tied to a single language or worldview.

Acknowledging Linguistic Injustice

In the field of literacy education, the dominant narrative has often pathologized the literacies of Black and other communities of Color (Souto-Manning, 2021). Early childhood

educators must critically evaluate the entrenched biases that shape how literacy is taught and assessed. Research has long demonstrated that children's home languages and dialects—whether bilingual, multilingual, or using nonstandard forms of English—should not be seen as deficits, but rather as vital cultural and linguistic resources (García & Wei, 2015; Hornberger & Link, 2012). When educators value these languages, they acknowledge the richness that children bring to the classroom, counteracting the harmful effects of linguistic hierarchies that devalue students' identities and ways of knowing (Paris & Alim, 2017). As educators, it is essential to dismantle these linguistic injustices and provide a space for children to use their full linguistic repertoire in learning contexts.

Oral storytelling, in particular, is a powerful tool for reaching children in communities where traditional print literacy may be less utilized and accessible. It provides a way to experience language in its spoken form, with emphasis on tone, rhythm, and emotion. Pluralistic picture books support this engagement by offering visual cues that can help children connect words with meanings, making literacy accessible for both visual and auditory learners (Crawford et al., 2024; Zapata et al., 2017).

By integrating many Englishes into pluralistic picture books and oral traditions, children are exposed to multiple linguistic varieties that help bridge the gap between local and global contexts. These forms offer a platform for the interplay of languages, providing opportunities for children to learn how English can adapt and be shaped by different regions, cultures, and histories (Baker & Ishikawa, 2021; Jenkins & Panero, 2024). This can foster a deeper appreciation for the flexibility of language and its role in uniting people globally.

Decolonizing Literacy Pedagogies

To move toward a decolonial approach to literacy development, early childhood educators must look beyond traditional, monocultural practices and embrace methods that reflect diverse cultural narratives. Incorporating pluralistic picture books that feature multilingual texts, as well as oral storytelling traditions, can make literacy experiences more culturally responsive and inclusive (Arizpe et al., 2023; Kelly et al., 2021). Oral storytelling offers an opportunity to bridge the past and present, allowing children to engage with history, cultural identity, and the power of narrative as they develop literacy skills. Recent studies emphasize how using such culturally sustaining pedagogies—like storytelling and multilingual texts—helps children not only develop their literacy skills but also strengthens their cultural identity (Eizadirad & Wane, 2023). This approach also challenges the standardization of literacy and embraces the various ways in which children learn and communicate. In this context, Souto-Manning (2021) argues that literacy teacher education has historically been complicit in reinforcing dominant cultural narratives that undermine the literacies of communities of Color. Moving forward, teacher educators must actively dismantle these narratives by embracing pedagogies that prioritize linguistic justice.

Pluralistic picture books and oral storytelling encourage children to think critically about language, power, and identity. By showcasing how English is used in different parts of the world, children develop an understanding of the fluidity of language and its relationship to social contexts. This opens up space for conversations about linguistic hierarchy, language prejudice, and the value of preserving diverse forms of English (Canagarajah, 2022; Pennycook, 2021; Wei, 2022).

Restorative Justice and Supporting Multilingual Teachers of Color in Literacy Education

Expanding on the idea of "education debt," and advocating for restorative practices that repair harm and foster more inclusive literacy instruction, we call on early childhood educators to confront the historical privilege of standardized White English and the marginalization of communities of Color. This requires a commitment to culturally responsive, justice-driven teaching that addresses past and present inequities (Darling-Hammond & Darling-Hammond, 2022; Sealey-Ruiz & Christensen, 2024; Winn & Winn, 2021). Educators must critically reflect on how their practices reinforce or challenge linguistic injustice. Inclusive curricula, culturally

relevant assessments, and the validation of diverse language practices are essential to building equitable, healing classrooms.

Supporting multilingual teachers of Color is also essential to literacy justice. Despite their value, these educators have long been underrepresented and unsupported in teacher education. Research shows that teacher diversity significantly benefits students of Color, especially in early childhood settings (Carver-Thomas, 2018; Villegas & Irvine, 2010; Sutcher et al., 2019; Rabadi-Raol & Pérez-González, 2024). Early childhood programs must offer professional development, mentorship, and leadership opportunities to multilingual teachers of Color. Their presence enhances cultural and linguistic competence across classrooms.

6. Conclusion

This article offers a conceptual framework for connecting the five components of early literacy instruction with oral storytelling and pluralistic picture books. It shows how educators might teach foundational skills in meaningful contexts that recognize children's Englishes, multilingual repertoires, identities, and community knowledge.

A decolonial approach to early childhood literacy challenges the rigid constraints of the science of reading by advocating balanced literacy practices that include pluralistic picture books, oral storytelling, and children's cultural knowledge. Critiques of literacy teacher education's role in perpetuating linguistic injustice call for changes in how educators approach literacy. By embracing decolonial pedagogies, valuing linguistic diversity, and engaging in restorative justice, educators can address historical and ongoing educational debts owed to BIPOC communities. Linguistically and culturally inclusive classrooms promote literacy while affirming children's identities and experiences.

For practice, early childhood educators can select books that reflect and broaden children's experiences, invite family and community stories, and use read-alouds and storytelling to teach sounds, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. They can pair these experiences with explicit instruction and examine classroom materials and assessments for assumptions that privilege standardized English. Teacher educators and program leaders can support this work by providing relevant materials, professional learning, and time for reflection.

By critiquing frameworks like the science of reading and embracing a broader, more inclusive definition of literacy that includes oral storytelling and pluralistic picture books, early childhood educators can help dismantle inequitable educational structures. This approach not only addresses the immediate needs of linguistically and culturally diverse children but also works toward a long-term vision of education that is restorative, just, and centered on equity for all learners. In doing so, early childhood educators can empower children to view literacy not as a gatekeeper, but as a tool for communication, identity formation, and social change (Souto-Manning et al., 2026).

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