He’s Too Young to Learn About That Stuff: Anti-Racist Pedagogy and Early Childhood Social Studies

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Few early childhood teachers engage in critical and anti-racist forms of pedagogical practice, primarily on the basis of developmental and political concerns. With the exception of a few studies, little has been documented relative to early childhood teachers’ experiences while enacting this form of pedagogical practice. The purpose of this article is to examine my teaching experiences engaging in critical, anti-racist pedagogy through the development and implementation of a critical action research study/unit on African American history. Data from this study reveal four levels of challenges that emerged throughout the development and implementation phases of this study/unit. Finally, I discuss several implications of this study for early childhood multicultural practice.

Key Words: Anti-racist, Critical action research, Drama pedagogy, Early childhood, Multicultural education, Social studies

Introduction

Recent statistics from the U.S. Census (2000) report that student demographics in early childhood classrooms are becoming increasingly racially, culturally, and ethnically diverse. Patricia Ramsey (2004) points out that an overwhelmingly large number of early childhood educators do not make conscious efforts to integrate culturally, racially, and ethnically diverse perspectives into the existing early childhood curriculum for at least two major reasons. First, many early childhood educators believe that discussions of race and racial injustice should be introduced during the later portion of the elementary school years where children are better suited to understand and respond to these issues. Second, the field of early childhood education lacks a clear, connected, and developmentally appropriate approach to teaching and learning about issues of race and racial oppression.

Because so few early childhood teachers engage in critical and anti-racist forms of pedagogical practice, with the exception of a few studies (Derman-Sparks, 1998; Paley, 1979), little has been documented relative to early childhood teachers’ experiences while engaging in such pedagogies. The purpose of this action research study, thus, is to examine my teaching experiences, as a first grade teacher, teaching about African American history through the use of critical, anti-racist pedagogy. The overarching research question that drives this study is: “How does critical, anti-racist pedagogy influence the perspectives and understandings in my first grade classroom related to African American history?” Other more specific questions include:

1. What is the nature of critical, anti-racist pedagogy in this early childhood classroom?
2. What developmental challenges and changes in and among my students occur as I teach about African American history through the use of critical, anti-racist pedagogy?

3. What personal/political challenges occur as I teach about African American history from critical and anti-racist perspectives?

4. What pragmatic challenges and changes (i.e., classroom, institutional etc.) occur as I teach African American history from critical, anti-racist perspectives?

This study is significant for three reasons. First, this study exists as an account of my own teaching experiences while engaging in critical, anti-racist pedagogy in an early childhood social studies classroom. It, consequently, provides understandings and results that are not available from other more traditional forms of “outsider” qualitative inquiry into this topic. Second, due to its emphasis on drama, this inquiry adds to the current practical knowledge related to the use of drama as a critical and anti-racist pedagogical tool. Finally, because so few studies involving critical, anti-racist pedagogy include early childhood educators, this study contributes practical knowledge to a specific gap within the broader anti-racist pedagogy literature.

**Literature Review**

The present study draws from, and is based in, the body of anti-racist education scholarship (i.e., Derman-Sparks & Phillips, 1997; Deyhle, 1995; Haymes, 1995; Kalin, 1999; Kalin, 2002; King, 1991; Lee, Menhart, & Okazawa-Rey, 1998; Tatum, 1997) in Preschool-12 settings. This body of research asserts that the racial oppression pervasive in the world also is prevalent in all facets of schooling. Three major themes exist within the anti-racist education literature in Preschool-12 settings. The first theme, which I refer to as Schools as Institutions of Racism, pertains to the ways in which schools and schooling processes work to maintain and further racism. The vast majority of anti-racist scholarship related to this theme outlines ways in which teachers and teacher educators can identify and resist systemic forms of racism within normal school practices and polices (i.e., curriculum, discipline, tracking, parental involvement, etc.). Louis Derman-Sparks and Carol Phillips (1997), for example, conceptualize four different levels of anti-racist multicultural education. The most basic level involves teachers engaging in a single event or activity. This level is problematic because it frequently leads to an increase in stereotypes about a particular cultural group. The next level is known as the project or unit approach. This level involves inserting something substantive with regard to culture into the existing curriculum. This, for example, might involve teaching a unit on Native American history. The third level, commonly known as the integrated or transformative level, involves integrating multicultural content throughout all subject areas. This level encourages students to be critical of knowledge and of the ways in which it is constructed. The final level is known as social action. This level involves encouraging students to act for social justice. The present study is situated at the second level along this continuum.

“I encountered structural challenges to implementing a critical approach to African American history. At the most basic level, I encountered tensions over fitting a non-superficial version of African American history into nine lessons. Part of this tension arose out of an institutional constraint related to where within the curriculum such content is deemed most appropriate.”
Another, second, theme within the anti-racist education literature relates to what I call the Process of Deconstructing Whiteness. Anti-racist scholarship (Howard, 1999; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998; McIntosh, 1988; Paley, 1979; Sleeter, 1993) consistent with this theme investigates the role Whiteness plays in contributing to and furthering racial oppression in education. This theme centers on the experiences of Whites and or Whiteness as it relates to the process of identifying, resisting, and combating racial oppression. It is important to note here that both themes labor toward the same goal of understanding, identifying, and eliminating racial oppression in schools and society. The second theme, however, focuses on the role of Whites within this quest. A large majority of this work consists of White scholars investigating and or deconstructing Whiteness in their own lives or the lives of other Whites. Joe Kincheloe and Shirley Steinberg (1998), for example, point out that many Whites resist the notion of White supremacy and privilege by positioning themselves as a victim of some sort. Rather than admit that they are benefactors of racial privilege, they purport themselves to be victims of programs, efforts, and pedagogies aimed at combating racism. The present study draws from this theme within anti-racist scholarship as it seeks to examine how racism and White privilege exists and operates in the curriculum concomitantly.

The third theme within anti-racist education literature emphasizes the relationship between race, racism, and social and academic outcomes for students of color. Anti-racist scholars (Kalin, 1999; King, 1991; McIntosh, 1988; Paley, 1979; & Sleeter, 1993) here document how ignoring the role and importance of Whiteness can lead to negative educational experiences and outcomes for students of color. Vivian Paley (1979), for example, discusses how not discussing racial difference in her classroom complicated the racial identity development processes of several Black children in her classroom. Despite her attempts to ignore race, she discusses how it was and continued to remain an influential factor in peer-to-peer relationships, teacher-to-peer relationships, and teaching and learning interactions in her classroom. In line with this third theme Joyce King (1991) asserts that many teachers participate in what she calls dyconscious racism by not critically reflecting on the ways in which race impacts their lives and the lives of their students. She notes that, if teachers (White) are not aware of the ways in which particular kinds of structures and pedagogies work to sustain and further racial oppression, they will inevitably reproduce these structures and pedagogies as a normal part of their practice. Similarly, Julie Kailin (1999) documents how colorblind racism is embedded in much of the liberal discourses on race in schools. In her study, she interviewed 222 teachers in a high achieving and predominantly White school district about racism in their schools. Findings from the study indicated that most teachers in this school district assumed a “blame the victim” attitude about racism. What her study suggests is that teachers can hold racist attitudes while simultaneously professing liberal non-racist attitudes toward students of color. Because perceptions ultimately impact teacher behavior, it is likely that these attitudes will manifest in the teacher’s practices in some shape or fashion. In keeping with both of the previously mentioned

“Many students responded that it felt good being a slave master due to the fact that they were no longer experiencing the pain of being a slave. In this sense, the students’ thinking or preference toward being a slave master had more to do with no longer being the victim of racial injustice than actually perpetuating racial injustice toward African Americans.”
themes in this body of anti-racist scholarship, the present study centers on identifying, resisting, and combating racism in school curriculum through the use of anti-racist pedagogy.

Methods

Data Collection Sources

This study employs a critical action research methodology (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; McCutcheon & Jung, 1990; Tripp, 1990). Three data sources were used: self-observations, teacher/researcher journal entries, and documents. Self-observations of key events during each lesson were recorded at the completion of each lesson in a field note journal (Hubbard & Power, 1999). I structured each lesson to include a writing exercise for the students to complete independently at the end to allow time for me to record observations of classroom events. I videotaped each lesson to examine my teaching experiences in greater depth while fully immersed in the teaching and learning process. The video recorder was in a peripheral corner of the room to keep my students from being distracted by the abnormality of its presence in the classroom. I explained the purpose of the study and the camera prior to beginning the study in an effort to minimize attention to it during the study. The teacher researcher journal (Hubbard & Power, 1999) was used in three distinctive ways. First, I reflected on the processes of developing the curriculum and acquiring the resources for each lesson. My thoughts, feelings, and experiences after developing each individual lesson were recorded in this journal. I noted any difficulties/successes I encountered, as well as the rationales behind the decisions I made in planning each lesson and the unit as a whole. Second, I reflected on my experiences after implementing each lesson. Thirdly, the teacher researcher journal was used as a means of being critical and reflexive about my ideologies and actions as both the teacher and researcher in the study. It is important to note that while no official member check process existed within the study, the teacher researcher journal provided opportunities for me to be critical about interpretations I made from the data.

Student work samples constituted the final data source for this inquiry. These assignments involved written responses to the content discussed in the lesson. I asked my students to draw an illustration that corresponds with what they wrote on the back of each assignment. Whether complete or incomplete, all of these assignments were collected at the end of the social studies period for that day. Because the focus of this study was my experiences while engaging in critical anti-racist pedagogy, I used these documents to determine what I was or was not doing as the teacher in the study.

After gaining approval from the building Principal to conduct the study in my classroom, I acquired written consent for the students to participate in the study. Because all the mornings in my classroom are devoted to delivering a district mandated language arts program, I found it more convenient to restrict this unit to the time formally allotted for social studies instruction. While social studies content and curriculum may be integrated into other content areas, it is mandated to occur three to four times per week (total of 120 minutes) by our district curriculum supervisor.

“Early childhood educators should investigate placing more emphasis on creating forums within their classrooms in which dialogic exchanges between children and teachers can be supported, nurtured, and honored.”
Data collection occurred over three months. I spent two weeks prior to implementing the study finalizing the nine lessons implemented in the study. Also, I used this time to acquire the children’s literature and resources to be used in the study. Taking the district’s mandated time frame for social studies instruction each week into serious consideration, I spent a total of five weeks implementing the instructional unit. Specifically, I taught one to two lessons from the instructional unit per week for a total of five weeks.

### Setting and Participants

This study takes place in a Pre-school through fifth grade elementary school in the Midwestern region of the United States. At the time of the study, the school had a total of 242 students. Approximately 75% of the students in the school are classified as being Black, Latino, and or Asian. Nineteen percent of the student population is White. The remaining 4% of the students are classified as multi-racial. Further, approximately 66% of the students here qualify for free and or reduced lunch. The students in this study are all members of my first grade class.

The classroom has a total of 28 students. Twenty-four of the students are African American. Three students in the classroom are White. One student is of mixed racial heritage (African American and Asian American). There are two Latino students in the classroom. Twelve students in the class are girls and 16 students are boys. A total of 23 out of the 28 students qualify for free or reduced lunch. The class is considered to be a traditional first grade self-contained class. I instruct the students in all academic subjects with the exception of physical education, art, and music. The students leave the classroom only for these subjects and to participate in lunch and recess each day.

### Plan of Action

In keeping with the critical action research methodological framework undergirding this study, I developed and implemented an instructional unit as the plan of action in this study. Rather than merely add to the current social studies curriculum with African American perspectives, my goal was to pursue a transformative approach to multicultural curriculum reform (Banks, 1994). Because it was important for me to seek curricular transformation through pedagogies in which my students and I could act in co-constructive, critical, dialogic, and reciprocal roles as teachers and learners, I incorporated process drama pedagogies in each lesson.

The unit consisted of nine individual lessons that required approximately 30-45 minutes of instructional time to implement. While the content discussed in each lesson varied, the overall structure of each lesson remained the same. The lessons began with an introductory portion in which I developed background information related to the topic through questions and dialogue. This introductory part often consisted of a brief review of the previous lesson’s content. The next part consisted of a textual interaction between my students and I in which we read, discussed, and critiqued particular texts as a whole group. The third part consisted of participating in one or more drama activities that required my students and me to draw from and extend the information learned in the textual interactions and previous lessons. Table 1 provides a description of the drama activities involved in each lesson. The fourth part, debriefing, involved having a discussion with my students related to the recent drama activities. The fifth and final part of each lesson involved my students completing a language arts assignment independently.
Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lesson Number</th>
<th>Lesson Title</th>
<th>Description of Drama Activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Origins, Beginnings of Slavery</td>
<td>The students and I dramatized various roles involved in moving through the “Door of No Return”. At the completion of this dramatization, we engaged in a discussion related to their experiences as Africans, Europeans, and their travel through the slave castles.</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Journey To America</td>
<td>The process drama in this lesson involved two different activities. To build on the previous lesson, the students re-enacted walking through the “Door of No Return” as both Africans and European slave captors. The students and I also enacted what life was like on a slave ship. My intent in this second activity was to capture, to some degree, the physical proximity of Africans during their captivity on a slave ship. We actually positioned ourselves on top of each other on a small mat during this activity. I asked the students to enact what the African people did and said during this experience. The subsequent discussion revolved around the experiences of both the Europeans and Africans while aboard slave ships.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Plantation Life</td>
<td>The process drama in this lesson involved enacting roles as both the slave masters and the slaves while working on plantations. We took turns assuming roles as both the slaves and slave masters. We dramatized several ways in which the slaves and slave masters behaved and communicated while working on the plantations. The discussion portion of the lesson emphasized their experiences as slaves and slave masters.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Slave Resistance and Escape</td>
<td>The process drama in this lesson involved two activities. First, my students and I pretended to travel along the Underground Railroad in secrecy as runaway slaves. Next, we divided into two different groups and pretended to be both runaway slaves and slave masters. We enacted the experiences and language both of these groups embodied during these experiences. The discussion focused on our experiences in role as well as the roles themselves.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Anti-Slavery and Abolitionist Movement</td>
<td>The process drama in this lesson involved us pretending to be runaway slaves on the Underground Railroad. We dramatized the role Harriet Tubman played as a relentless and sometimes confrontational leader in this endeavor. We also dramatized the tensions between escaping slaves and slave masters who re-captured them. Finally, we further complicated the drama by integrating the role of the abolitionists.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Civil War</td>
<td>We dramatized the war between the Union and Confederate Armies from both perspectives. Next, we dramatized the actions and language the Confederate Army embodied as they lost the war. We discussed our roles as Confederate and Union army soldiers. Finally, we dramatized the actions and language the Union Army embodied as they won the war. The subsequent discussion revolved around their roles as members of the Confederate and Union armies.</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Reconstruction</td>
<td>The process drama in this lesson involved is pretending to be members of the Klu Klux Klan (KKK) who encountered a Black man walking alone one night. Next we pretended to perform a ‘night ride’ on an African American family. We discussed our roles as KKK members.</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Jim Crow</td>
<td>We dramatized the historic moment in 1960 when four African American college students in Greensboro, North Carolina refused to remove themselves from a segregated lunch counter. We assumed the roles of the police officers, college students, waitress, manager, and restaurant attendees in the drama. We re-enacted this drama several times with different students assuming different roles. I concluded the lesson by having students write reasons why they did or did not think the college students should have removed themselves from the counter or resisted as they did. My intent was to engage my students in thinking critically about the consequences of resisting institutional racism.</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Desegregation and Freedom Acquisition</td>
<td>The process drama involved us pretending to be Rosa Parks and others key figures (bus driver, police officers, passengers, etc.) involved in her historic event on the bus.</td>
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Data Analysis

Data analysis involved four on-going and reoccurring phases. In keeping with a grounded theory method of data analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the first phase involved reading the data in three specific ways as a means of becoming familiar with the data from three different perspectives. The second phase in my data analysis process involved engaging in both open ended and axial coding (Glaser, 1978) processes. The third phase involved creating broader categories for the codes attached to the data. I attempted to better understand my data through thematic analysis (Glaser, 1978). The fourth phase in my data analysis process involved using narrative inquiry (Richardson, 1994) as a means of connecting and weaving the discrete and separate data into a coherent broader story.

Findings

Data from this study indicate that I experienced four different types of challenges or what I call tensions as I engaged in critical, anti-racist pedagogy throughout this unit on African American history. At the curriculum development level, I experienced tensions related to what to include within the unit. I struggled with whether or not to develop an essential or a complex version of African American history, as nine lessons seemed to be a quite confining amount of space to adequately and richly discuss the complexities of African American history. Pertaining to the students in my classroom, I experienced tensions related to what I thought the students knew and what they actually knew related to race and African American history prior to engaging in the unit. I struggled to push my students beyond dichotomized notions of racial justice/injustice. I experienced tensions with some White parents in my classroom, as discussions of race and racial oppression evoked negative emotions.

Avoiding Essentialized Notions of African American History

Early in the lesson development phase of this work, I found myself encountering tensions around what to include in this nine lesson unit on African American history. Many of these initial tensions arose out of both a personal and political desire and effort not to treat this content in a superficial manner as a means of increasing the critical racial consciousness in my classroom. Seeing race, as represented and discussed within the institutionalized social studies curriculum as a location of domination, marginalization, critique, and resistance, I began with intentions of transforming (Banks, 1994) the curriculum. Practically speaking, this required creating a new curriculum altogether, as the current social studies curriculum addressed African American history in a superficial and non-critical manner. While this task appeared quite simple to achieve in theory, it proved itself to be somewhat challenging in practice when I encountered the question of what would or would not be the focus of each lesson within this unit. Having only nine lessons in which to present a comprehensive yet critical version of African American history, I was forced to make some necessary submissions and exclusions around these issues of curriculum content. As with planning the broader scope and sequence of the unit, I had to make necessary negotiations around what would be included in a particular lesson aimed at addressing a particular theme or moment within African American history. In my journal I wrote:

There are what seem like many different (quality) pieces of children’s literature to pull from. However, I could only use one-and-one-half books at
most per lesson. How could I ensure that I covered the information relevant in each lesson by using only one book or so per lesson? After much hesitation and thought, I decided on an alternative list of resources I would use for the first five lessons. Lesson five, Reconstruction, presented itself as a challenge for me. I thought: What major idea could I attempt to teach about reconstruction? This seems like such a complex concept and moment in history to discuss with first graders. After a bit of thought, I finally decided on using the KKK as the center of this lesson — Not to mention — I found a good piece of literature to coincide with this lesson. The next major topic I struggled with was the Civil Rights movement. I felt like this could almost be an entire unit in of itself. There are so many significant events that have to be collapsed within 1 lesson or so. Would this ultimately be doing the very thing I am trying so hard to resist? That is, presenting an essentialist version of the African American cultural and historical experience. How do I adequately discuss events such as: the sit-ins, boycotts, school desegregation, march on Washington, etc. all within two lessons or so? How will I do so in a way that is adequate and efficient? Even more so, would this nine lesson unit be essentializing African American history? (Journal Entry: January 15, 2007)

This tension of what to include in the unit surfaced again as I began to plan each individual lesson. This time, the tension shifted to how deep I should go in each lesson as I worked to maintain a non-superficial and critical approach to African American history. In my journal I wrote:

Today I planned the third lesson. The topic was Plantation Life. I encountered challenges around how much depth to cover in this lesson. I almost felt like I could have taught an entire unit on plantation life. I felt like there were so many issues that needed to be discussed in such a short lesson. I thought about changing the unit to include two days on plantation life, but I thought something else in the unit would be sacrificed. So, I decided to stick with the original plan. I thought that if I stayed too long here I would not be able to cover everything else in the nine lesson unit (Journal Entry: January 30, 2007).

Sonia Nieto (2000) argues that schools maintain and exacerbate racism through the curriculum by way of excluding or minimizing the contributions of ethnically and racially diverse groups in society. Teachers working toward raising the consciousness of racism in and among their students are likely to encounter challenges, as the institutionalized curriculum provides little or no space for teachers to engage in pro-longed critical discussions about race and racism in society. As is witnessed here in the data, I encountered structural challenges to implementing a critical approach to African American history. At the most basic level, I encountered tensions over fitting a non-superficial version of African American history into nine lessons. Part of this tension arose out of an institutional constraint related to where within the curriculum such content is deemed most appropriate. I could only implement this content during the district allotted formal social studies periods, because most of the other subject areas were rigidly defined and controlled by the district’s administration.
Assumptions over Students’ Racial Knowledge

Having participated in only one year or less of formal schooling and being anywhere from five to seven years of age, I assumed that my students knew little other than the traditional and superficial notions of African American history such as the Martin Luther King Jr. “I Have A Dream” speech and the Rosa Parks’ famous “Bus Ride.” Thus, I constructed many of the lessons in the unit in such a way as to involve a significant number of textual readings. Initially, I assumed that I could best resolve this perceived lack of racial background information through extensive reading. To my early surprise, this assumption was incorrect. In a post lesson reflection on Lesson four I wrote:

I got so involved in the discussion that I didn’t want to move on with the texts. However, the other part of me felt that it was necessary to read the text—as it would yield more info than our discussion. After taking the sixth comment/question or so, I began with the book. As I read the book, I couldn’t help but to have mixed feelings about ending the discussion. As I read the story, fewer and fewer questions arose from the students. During the pre-text discussion, I couldn’t help but to think “wow” these children have a lot of knowledge about the Underground Railroad already. When I asked them what they thought would happen to escaped slaves if caught, I was surprised by the richness of their responses. M.W. predicted that their hands might get cut off. N.O. speculated that slave masters would use knives to cut off their heads. From here I added to the discussion about how escaped slaves were used as examples. This conversation/dialogue seemed to flow so naturally between the students and me. Why did this exchange occur so naturally? Why did these students have so much prior knowledge? The more answers I gave, the more questions/comments they asked /supplied. I wished I could have eliminated reading the text altogether. What was lost by ending the discussion and reading the text? What was sacrificed, what was gained? After a bit of reluctance, I began the story. It seemed like the more I read, the quieter the students became. Was this a sign of processing or silencing? (Journal Entry, February 26, 2007).

Patricia Ramsey (2004) argues that children as young as three years of age begin to develop racial knowledge about and toward particular groups in society. Moreover, Deborah Ausdale and Joe Feagin (2002) argue that children have a very profound and accurate understanding of race as they are consciously and unconsciously being socialized by multiple social and cultural institutions in society (media, school, family, church, child care center, etc.). Interestingly, however, many adults including teachers, parents, and caregivers assume from a deficit-oriented perspective, that racial and cultural knowledge does not develop until much later in children. In keeping with these two assertions, I began this study with the assumption that my children had little or no prior knowledge related to what I had identified as critical aspects of African American history. To my surprise, many students already possessed a significant level of background racial knowledge on this topic. Perhaps, as Ramsey (2004) further explains, the students in my classroom developed this consciousness of race and racism out of personal or family experiences.
Another major tension I experienced within this study concerned pushing my students to think beyond a dichotomized consciousness of racial justice. Following the drama portion in several lessons, I asked my students how they felt as they pretended to be the oppressor (i.e., slave master, Confederate Army, Ku Klux Klan [KKK], etc.) in the drama activities. I was surprised by many of the responses my students gave having expected them to recognize the injustice associated with the dominant perspective with little or no help from me. In my journal I reflected:

Today I attempted to use the drama to engage the children in thinking about agency. I asked them to “act” out whether they would stay or attempt to escape as slaves. All but two children left. Later, during the debriefing, L.J. and A.J. had quite eloquent and different rationales for their decisions. I thought about how deep I should go in the discussion. I decided to move on; however, it kind of bothered me when a couple of students said they enjoyed being the slave master. Was this because I had only presented two options/identities for them to choose from? (Journal Entry, 2/20/07)

At this point in the unit, I was becoming troubled by my students’ characterization of the role of slave master. Having assumed they would automatically identify the injustice associated with being a slave master. Many students responded that it felt good being a slave master due to the fact that they were no longer experiencing the pain of being a slave. In this sense, the students’ thinking or preference toward being a slave master had more to do with no longer being the victim of racial injustice than actually perpetuating racial injustice toward African Americans. As the unit progressed, I made conscious efforts during the discussions to aid my students in recognizing the injustice associated with the dominant perspective. Unfortunately, my students were slow to recognize this injustice. I began to question if my students’ responses were real or if they were pretend, because we had just completed the drama exercise. This pattern of not recognizing the racial injustice associated with the dominant perspective continued in the next lesson. In a journal reflection on Lesson six: Civil War I wrote:

During the debriefing, I asked the students to describe how it felt to be the South when they lost and the North when they won. I was both a bit disappointed and surprised by the reasons/rationales many of the students gave for feeling good about the North winning the war. I thought they would have stated that they felt good because slavery was wrong. However, most of them explained that it felt good because they could avenge the violence that was perpetuated against them by the South. After M.A. mentioned that he, in fact, felt good because slavery was over, I took this opportunity to inquire if any one else felt similarly. A couple of other students articulated a position that was similar to M.A., but the majority of the students maintained their previous position. How do I move students beyond win/lose understandings of justice? How do I help my students understand that using violence to combat oppression is problematic? How can I scaffold my students into constructing other more productive ways of thinking about combating injustice? (Journal Entry, 3/5/07)

Peter McLaren (1989) explains that it often is difficult to recognize injustice in its varied
manifestations within the curriculum as they are often hidden from plain view. The students in my class did not easily recognize the racial injustice embedded in many of the dominant perspectives presented in the unit. What was even more astonishing was that many of them associated positive feelings with the dominant perspective. The dominant perspective was seemingly better than the marginalized perspective. It was only through extensive questioning that several students eventually began to identify the racial injustice inherent in the dominant perspectives.

**Parental Opposition to Racialized Perspectives**

A fourth tension developing during this study pertained to the ways in which race, racism, and the discussions thereof became problematic for some of the White parents in my classroom. Julie Kailin (2002) points out that engaging in critical, anti-racist education can lead to seemingly negative consequences for teachers, as this form of education requires teachers to be openly oppositional and ideological about their position toward resisting and eradicating racism within school structures and processes. In doing so, race moves from being less neutral to more political as those parties involved are positioned as working either toward or against racial oppression. Consistent with Kailin’s (2002) point, tensions developed between some White parents and me as I labored to openly resist racial oppression within the mandated, standardized, and taken for granted first grade social studies curriculum. Being open about my commitment toward resisting and combating racism as an African American critical educator seemed to have little or no impact on the White parents of the students in my classroom prior to implementing the unit. Early into the unit, one of the White parents of a student in my class became concerned about what his daughter was learning under the guise of Civil Rights. After participating in a lesson related to why we celebrate Martin Luther King Jr.’s contribution to society, a little girl named A.L. went home to share with her dad what she learned about Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Ku Klux Klan. When I arrived at school on the subsequent Tuesday, my principal greeted me at my mailbox with a displeased look and asked me to join her in her office. When she closed her office door after me, I knew that what we were going to discuss was serious in nature. After a short debriefing on the matter, the concerned parents entered the room and the meeting between the four of us began. We dialogued about the issue in question for roughly 45 minutes or so, and then we all eventually concluded that there had been no harm committed by the content presented in the lesson. I could not help but to leave that meeting feeling confused. On one hand, I understand that discussions of race can evoke negative feelings. I was not sure whether or not the parents’ concern was over what their child was learning or over what this content forced them as White Americans to discuss and confront with their child. Following the incident I reflected in my journal:

I arrived at school and Ms. Cana (Principal) asked to speak with me. She said that Mr. L.R., Pat L.R.’s father spoke with her and mentioned that Pat said, “White people didn’t like Black people back then!” Ms. Cana said that Mr. L.R. felt that his daughter was too young to be introduced to that material and that he “just wanted to talk”. Immediately I was both shocked and disturbed. Ms. Cana said that the meeting would take place at 9:00 am. As I journeyed to my room, several thoughts entered my mind. I wondered if this was due to: a) developmental misunderstandings or b) racism by her father—and seeing no value in the study of African American history. When the
meeting started, Mr. L.R. voiced his apologies for making such an issue of this. As the discussion ensued each of our concerns were eased. From our conversation I learned that he felt unsure as to how to have an age appropriate discussion of such topics with his daughter. He also felt that I should have informed him prior to instructing the students around these issues. That way, he could have been better suited to discuss these issues. We both ended the meeting on cordial terms and with feelings of relief. He agreed with my argument about the need for children (his daughter in particular) to learn about what Whites did to the world. He apologetically emphasized that it wasn’t just Blacks and that “we” (Whites) did it to the Japanese as well. So the question for me ended up being: Was all of his anxiety over not having the strategies to deal with racism and White privilege appropriately with his daughter? Or, was it more of a lack of a desire to confront/acknowledge racism and White privilege in general? I guess I will never truly know—After all, he signed the consent form for his daughter to participate in the study (Journal Entry, 1/26/07).

Such also was the case with another White parent of a student in my classroom during the course of the unit. During a Parent Teacher meeting, this parent expressed her concern over the content in the unit as well. Like A.L.’s father, she couched her discussion in the notion of age appropriateness. Following our discussion I reflected in my journal:

C.M.’s mom mentioned to me during Parent Teacher Conferences that she wanted C.M. to learn about M.L.K. and African American history, but she didn’t want him to learn about discrim-

ination. Her reason being was that she wanted to preserve his innocence. She stated that he was “too young” to learn about all that “stuff”. I just listened to her comments and the conversation quickly turned to C.M.’s academic progress. I wondered why she thought C.M. was “too young”. I also wondered how a discussion of MLK could occur without discussing discrimination simultaneously (Journal Entry, 2/19/07).

Louise Derman-Sparks and Carol Phillips (1997) argue that discussions of race and racism often are met with resistance, guilt, and shame. When Whites lack adequate tools to properly process such feelings, it is common for them to respond to these feelings through denial, blame, rationalization, and or avoidance. Consistent with Derman-Sparks and Phillips (1997) assertion, we see how merely mentioning groups such as the Ku Klux Klan and discrimination elicits feelings of concern between A.L.’s. and C.M’s. parents. What is most important in these events is that there was more articulated concern over the appropriateness of this content than the accuracy of the discussions taking place. What becomes apparent in both of these interactions was that they, the White parents, felt quite uncomfortable discussing these issues with their children, as it forced them to recognize the role of racial oppression and privilege in both past and present contexts.

“Early childhood educators wishing to engage in similar kinds of critical, anti-racist pedagogy might consider doing so in ways that are both responsive to, and cognizant of, the dialogic curriculum that will develop during the process.”
Discussion

The results of this study have three implications for early childhood multicultural practice. First, data from this study remind those of us within the field of early childhood education of the need to construct what I call dialogical safe spaces for children. These are spaces within early childhood classrooms where teachers and students can and are encouraged to engage in open, honest, and critical dialogue around issues of race, power, and oppression. While it is common for early childhood educators to assume that children cannot contribute substantively to discussions of race, oppression, and marginality, based on the data from this study, I argue that young children have a significant amount of knowledge to discuss around these subjects. Children may exhibit minimal participation in discussions related to these issues due to the ways in which these discussions are structured. Since I structured many of the lessons in this unit to center on teacher directed pedagogy based on preconceived notions about what they did or did not know. This follows a practice common among many early childhood teachers who spend more time speaking to children than speaking with children. This is due primarily to the assumption that children have little to contribute to serious discussions of race, culture, oppression, etc. (Ausdale & Feagin, 2002). To my surprise, the data from this study suggest that when we, the early childhood educators, create spaces where children can feel comfortable and safe enough to voice their ideals, musings, and tentative thinking related to these issues, they are more likely to participate in and contribute to rich and mutually beneficial dialogues related to issues of race and other forms of diversity. Early childhood educators should investigate placing more emphasis on creating forums within their classrooms in which dialogic exchanges between children and teachers can be supported, nurtured, and honored.

The data from this study also imply the need for early childhood teachers to acknowledge, integrate, and respond to what I call the dialogic curriculum that developed in this classroom along the course of implementing a unit on race, class, or gender. This is the unpremeditated curriculum that develops in and through extensive dialogues about race and racism. While it is common for educators in later elementary school years to enlist a dialogic curriculum when teaching and learning about content related to race, racism, and the like, it is less common for early childhood teachers to utilize such a curriculum when teaching and learning about issues of difference and marginality. Data from this study imply the potential dialogue has to both enrich and expand the pre-mediated curriculum. At times within this study, the dialogues that developed outside of and around the texts became more engaging and enriched than the textually mediated dialogue used to anchor the lessons. Early childhood educators wishing to engage in similar kinds of critical, anti-racist pedagogy might consider doing so in ways that are both responsive to, and cognizant of, the dialogic curriculum that will develop during the process.

The data from this study yield a final implication for practice related to children’s understanding of race, culture, and other forms of diversity in society. Like many early childhood educators, I began the study with the assumption that my students had little or no background knowledge related to issues of race and culture in general and African American history in particular. As such, I structured many of the lessons to involve a great deal of textual reading. To my astonishment, I realized early on that my students already possessed a great deal of background knowledge related to many of the concepts I intended to introduce in the texts. The important lesson that I acquire from this experience is not to abandon the texts in their entirety, as the amount and depth of background knowledge children bring to a...
particular topic will inevitably vary from class to class and topic to topic. Instead, I suggest that teachers investigate developing and utilizing an open-ended racial and cultural assessment tool throughout the unit to determine children’s racial and cultural knowledge related to the topic under investigation. This racial and cultural assessment tool could be used in three specific ways throughout the study. First, prior to implementing the unit, the assessment tool can be used to determine students’ prior knowledge related to the content under exploration. In much the same way that teachers conduct pre-lesson assessments of students’ present knowledge when implementing mathematics, reading, and or science units, data from this study suggest that teachers might conduct a pre-assessment prior to engaging students in discussions related to race, racism, marginality, etc. This pre-assessment can then be used to map the directions of the curriculum. Perhaps, this assessment might initially involve collecting and documenting students’ responses to questions such as:

1. What do you already now about African or African-American (or any other group for that matter) history?

2. Who are some important people in African or African-American history?

3. How did African and African-American people arrive in America?

Depending on the level of sophistication of students’ background knowledge, the teacher should also be prepared to provide other impromptu questions to scaffold students’ recollection of racial/cultural content. I recommend that this information be recorded and posted in a conspicuous location in the classroom. Then, prior to implementing each subsequent lesson in the unit, teachers can revisit the previously learned concepts by reviewing the information noted on this assessment and then pose specific questions related to the lesson at hand. This secondary use of the assessment tool is important, because it is likely that some students will engage in dialogues with parents and others outside of the classroom after each lesson. By posting the assessment in a visible area in the classroom and adding to it prior to each lesson, the assessment becomes a working document that is being used by both the teacher and the students in the classroom as an on-going means of informing and directing teaching and learning related to the content being explored. Finally, by revisiting this racial and cultural assessment on a daily basis through the duration of the unit, students may be better able to synthesize the information being learned about the particular racial/cultural group under investigation. Ultimately, through using the racial and cultural assessment tool in these three ways, teachers and students might engage in deeper, critical, and non-superficial dialogues related to racial and cultural diversity in society.

References


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