

2015

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Recommended Citation

Husband, Terry. (2015). "Please Stop Whipping Me" Writing About Race and Racism in an Early Childhood Social Studies Classroom. *i.e.: inquiry in education: Vol. 6: Iss. 1, Article 2*.

Retrieved from: <http://digitalcommons.nl.edu/ie/vol6/iss1/2>

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i.e.: inquiry in education is published by the Center for Practitioner Research at the National College of Education, National-Louis University, Chicago, IL.

"Please Stop Whipping Me"

Writing About Race and Racism in an Early Childhood Social Studies Classroom

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Recent statistics from the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) (2010) indicate that the United States is becoming ever increasingly diverse. As such, more and more classrooms are likely to be made up of students from racially diverse backgrounds. In light of these dramatic demographic changes, antiracist scholars (Attwood, 2011; Case & Hemmings, 2005; Derman-Sparks & Phillips, 1997; Gilborn, 1996; Lawrence, 2005) advocate for teachers to integrate racially diverse perspectives into the school curriculum as a means of helping students develop the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to function within a racially diverse society. Yet and still, many early childhood educators remain reluctant to discuss issues of race and racism with their students (Ramsey, 2004). While some early childhood teachers believe that young children do not possess the cognitive capabilities to engage in critical discussions of race and racism in substantive ways, others believe that discussions of race and racism are inappropriate and or too harsh for young children (Husband, 2012). Consequently, little has been documented related to how children in P-3 settings think about and respond to critical discussions of race and racism. Even more so, nothing has been documented in the extant social studies scholarship related to how children reflect on race and racism in their writing.

The purpose of this critical action research study is to examine how young children reflect on race and racism in their writing while participating in an antiracist unit on African American history. The research questions that drive this study are:

1. How do children in this 1st grade classroom reflect on race and racism in writing while engaging in an antiracist unit on African American history?
2. What themes are most prevalent in their writing?

This study is significant for two reasons. First, this study presents findings related to how young children respond to discussions of race and racism in writing. Much of the extant scholarship related to students' reflections on race and racism involve students at the later stages of elementary and beyond. Little is known about how young children write about issues of race and racism in classroom. Hence, this study contributes directly to this gap within the scholarship. Practically speaking, this study is also significant because it provides early childhood educators

with insight into how writing might be used as an antiracist pedagogical tool in the early childhood social studies classroom.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws from an antiracist theoretical perspective (Berry & Stovall, 2013; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Jacobson, 1998; Morrison, 1990; Roediger, 2005; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Stovall, 2013). As such, three key theoretical constructs inform this study: (a) institutionalized racism, (b) critical analysis, and (c) oppositional pedagogy. Concerning institutionalized racism, this study defines racism as a form of racial injustice that is supported by institutional power (Gillborn, 2005). Consequently, the term *racism* as used in this study refers to institutionalized policies and practices that produce inequitable outcomes for people of color. In this study, my students and I examine how African Americans were/are victimized by institutionalized forms of racism in society, such as legalized slavery, Jim Crow Laws, and school segregation.

Racist ideologies are often expressed and advanced in the official school curriculum (Berry & Stovall, 2013; Brown & Au, 2014; Chapman, 2013). For this reason, an antiracist theoretical perspective necessitates a critical examination of the ideas, people, and events presented in the

An antiracist theoretical perspective necessitates a critical examination of the ideas, people, and events presented in the official school curriculum as a means of identifying racial bias

official school curriculum as a means of identifying racial bias. An antiracist perspective also challenges teachers to reconstruct the official curriculum to include the experiences and perspectives of people of color. In keeping with this construct, the antiracist curriculum I developed and implemented in this study centered on the experiences and perspectives of African Americans.

The third theoretical construct of antiracist theory that informs this study is the notion of oppositional pedagogy. Antiracist scholars (Attwood, 2011; DeLeon, 2006; Lopez, 2008) argue that many schools develop and implement racist policies and practices on a regular basis. Antiracist pedagogy exists as a means of intentionally and openly opposing these racist policies and practices. In keeping with this theoretical construct, the present study seeks to develop an oppositional consciousness of race and racism in and among the students in the classroom. Whereas race is traditionally treated as a politically neutral concept in most early childhood classrooms, race is treated as a politically laden and highly problematic concept within the unit being implemented in this study. Furthermore, the goal in doing so is to help children begin to identify how racial injustice exists and operates in the larger society.

This study also draws from Bakhtin's (1981) notion of ideological becoming. Bakhtin (1981) explained that one's ideological self develops as he or she interacts with existing ideologies, discourses, and people in their local environment. This process is referred to as ideological becoming. Essentially, ideological development occurs as a result of a struggle that takes place between one's personally held existing inner ideology and an outward authoritative discourse that exists in the world around them. Because this study examines the nature of children's responses related to race and racism, I deem this theoretical construct to be a useful tool for

identifying what the students wrote related to racism and the ideological discourses associated with these responses.

Literature Review

The present study draws from and is situated in antiracist education scholarship (Attwood, 2011; Case & Hemmings, 2005; Derman-Sparks & Phillips 1997; Gillborn, 1996; Lawrence, 2005) in educational settings. Antiracist education draws from a wide range of diverse theoretical and methodological traditions. The term *antiracist education*, as used in this study, draws from Kailin's (2002) notion of antiracist education specifically. In short, Kailin (2002) defines antiracist education as a critical approach to education that: (a) centers on knowledge deconstruction, (b) is overtly political, (c) analyzes racial oppression in tandem with other forms of oppression, and (d) emphasizes critical reflection in action. Regarding knowledge deconstruction, Kailin (2002) points out that an antiracist approach to education centers on critiquing formal and informal schooling policies, practices, and texts as a means of exposing racial bias and inequity. Concerning the second tenet, Kailin (2002) also points out that an antiracist approach is distinct from other multicultural approaches to education, in that, it is explicitly political in nature. In other words, antiracist practitioners are open and vocal about their commitment to ending racial oppression and marginalization in schools. Next, unlike other less critical forms of multicultural education, antiracist education seeks to analyze multiple forms of oppression simultaneously. For example, an antiracist teacher might critique racial bias in the formal curriculum while simultaneously examining the extent to which the curriculum is biased toward females. Finally, regarding the last tenet, an antiracist approach focuses on taking social action to resist and rectify racial oppression in schools and classrooms.

The vast majority of antiracist scholarship outlines ways in which teachers and teacher educators can identify and resist systemic forms of racism within normal school practices and policies (i.e., curriculum, discipline, tracking, parental involvement, etc.). For example, Louis Derman-Sparks and Carol Phillips (1997) conceptualize four different levels of antiracist 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 racial/cultural group. The next level is known as the project or unit approach. This level involves inserting something substantive with regard to race/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 level, involves integrating multicultural content throughout all subject areas. This level encourages students to be critical of the ways in which knowledge is constructed. The final level is known as social action. This level involves encouraging students to act for social justice. Little is known about how early childhood students respond to antiracist units of study within the early childhood classroom. The present study contributes to this gap within the scholarship.

A second theme within the antiracist education scholarship relates to how white privilege exists and operates within normal schooling processes (McIntosh, 1990; Pennington, Brock, & Ndura 2012; Seidl & Hancock 2011). In contrast to the aforementioned theme, much of this scholarship centers on the experiences of White scholars, teachers, and teacher educators as they work to examine and deconstruct the impact of racial privilege in their own lives and the lives of their

students. For example, Vivian Paley (2000) discusses how she implemented a colorblind approach to race in her classroom. Ultimately, this approach complicated the racial identity development process of several of the Black students in her classroom. Little is known about how early childhood students think about and respond to notions of white privilege in society. Moreover, the current body of scholarship in this area does not examine the experiences of K-3 students as they wrestle with issues of race and racism in the social studies curriculum. The present study contributes to this gap within the scholarship.

Methods

This study employs a critical action research design (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2007; Kemmis, 2006). Accordingly, I developed and implemented a nine lesson unit on African American history. This unit is based in critical and antiracist perspectives. The entire study lasted a total of three months. One month was spent gathering materials for the unit and developing each lesson in the unit, while the remaining two months were spent implementing the unit.

Data Sources

Three data sources were involved in this study: (a) children's writing samples, (b) self-observations, and (c) teacher/researcher journal entries. In keeping with the overarching research question that drives this study, children's writing samples were collected and included as the central data informant in this study. In addition, I videotaped each lesson and performed systematic self-observations (Rodriguez & Ryave 2002) of each lesson. These self-observations were documented and maintained in a field note log. These observations consisted of concrete descriptions of the events that transpired during each lesson. I reflected on the events in each lesson in the teacher/researcher journal (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 2004). The teacher/researcher journal provided a space for me to be self-reflective about my roles as the researcher and teacher in the study. The teacher/researcher journal also provided a space for me to reflect on the children's writing samples.

Curriculum

The curriculum consisted of nine lessons on African American history. The lessons were organized in a chronological fashion, beginning with the capture of Africans on the continent of Africa and ending with the Civil Rights movement. The lessons in the unit were approximately 60 minutes in length. Approximately 30 minutes of each lesson were spent reading and discussing texts and engaging in critical drama activities (Doyle 1993) designed to facilitate critical thinking. Students were allotted approximately 30 minutes at the end of each lesson to write a written response to various prompts. With the exception of the final lesson, each lesson had one prompt for students to respond to in writing. The final lesson lasted two days and had two different prompts for students to respond to in writing. Each of the prompts corresponded with the themes, events, texts, and historical figures presented in each lesson (see Appendix A).

Setting/Participants

The study takes place in a small urban elementary school in the Midwest portion of the United States. The school serves children in grades P-5. At the time of the study, 242 students were enrolled at the school. 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 here are classified as multiracial. Further, approximately 66% of the students here qualify for free or reduced lunch.

There were 28 students in the classroom where the study takes place. Three students in the classroom were White. One student was of mixed racial heritage (African American and Asian American). There were two Latino students in the classroom. Twelve students in the class were girls and 16 students were boys. A total of 23 out of the 28

students qualified for free or reduced lunch, according to official school records. The class was considered to be a traditional first grade self-contained class. I instructed the students in all academic subjects with the exception of physical education, art, and music at the time of the study.

I believed that teaching a superficial and politically neutral version of history would cause more damage to my students' consciousness of race and racism than teaching a critical version of history

Researcher Positionality

At the time of the study, I was the first grade teacher in a classroom and a part-time doctoral student in multicultural education at a large nearby research extensive university. Having studied the works of several antiracist scholars (Gillborn, 2005; Kailin, 2002; Lawrence, 2005) during my graduate studies, I became deeply committed to issues of racial justice in learning. Therefore, I deemed it necessary to teach my students about race and racism in ways that were critical and nonsuperficial. Also, as an African American teacher who was working in a classroom context comprised of predominately African American children, I felt an equal political responsibility to teach my students about race and racism in ways that were critical and untraditional.

Furthermore, I believed that teaching a superficial and politically neutral version of history would cause more damage to my students' consciousness of race and racism than teaching a critical version of history. Hence, I developed and implemented the unit involved in the present study.

Data Analysis

Children's writing samples were analyzed using content analysis (Krippendorff, 2012). As such, five phases were involved in the data analysis process. First, I used open-ended and closed-ended coding processes to code the children's writing samples. I coded each line in each writing sample. Second, I recorded and maintained the coded data in a coding notebook as a Microsoft Word document. Third, I developed four analytic categories for these codes and sorted the coded data into these categories. The analytic categories I developed were: (a) antagonistic responses, (b) protagonist responses, (c) neutral responses, and (d) other. Students' responses were sorted into these analytic categories on the basis of having two or more lines of coded data that corresponded with the definition of each category. The "other" category was used to categorize data that did not easily fit into the other three categories. Data in the "other" category was eventually collapsed into one of the other three categories based in similarities and congruence. Fourth, I created a frequency table to document how often students created each type of response (see Appendix B). I compared the relationship between students' responses in each individual lesson and what was presented and discussed in each individual lesson in the antiracist unit. I noted these comparisons in the teacher/researcher journal. I compared each day's writing with

each other as well as with the perspectives that were presented and discussed in the texts throughout the unit. The titles of the analytic categories were renamed to *repressive*, *resistant*, and *retaliatory* during this process to better represent the relationship between the different types of written responses the students produced. I developed assertions from the data that were supported by at least three written responses. Finally, I selected an exemplary writing sample to represent each of the three types of responses that were produced throughout the unit.

Validity

I established validity within this study in three ways that are consistent with action teacher research paradigms and methodological traditions. First, I triangulated (Merriam, 2009) the data prior to formulating assertions. Second, being both the teacher and researcher in the study, I remained systematic (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2004) during my data collection processes by collecting data during the same time each week and in the same manner during each lesson. Finally, I used a teacher/researcher journal to be self-reflective (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) as I formulated assertions from the data.

Results

Findings from this study reveal that students developed three different kinds of written responses during the antiracist unit: (a) repressive responses, (b) resistant responses, and (c) retaliatory responses (see Table 2). First, students developed what I refer to as a *repressive response* to issues of race and racism. That is, when prompted to tell how they would combat particular issues related to racism, many students wrote responses that centered on noncombative, illusionary, and/or magical (Freire, 1973) notions of race and racism. Approximately 31% (n = 79) of the writing samples were categorized as being repressive in nature. The second type of response that students developed was what I refer to as a *resistant response*. In this type of written response, students discussed ways of resisting racism that were nonviolent in nature. Approximately 54% (n = 141) of the writing samples were categorized as being resistant in nature. The final type of written response that students developed throughout the unit is known as a *retaliatory response*. In this type of response, students wrote about combating racism through the use of various forms of violence. Approximately 15% (n = 39) of the writing samples were categorized as being retaliatory in nature. In the subsequent sections, I discuss each of these types of written responses in greater detail.

Repressive Responses

The first type of written response that my students developed was what I call a *repressive response*. I refer to this type of response as repressive because it centers on what Freire (1973) defines as a magical or illusionary notion of race. When prompted to respond to issues of racial injustice directly in their writing, many students developed written responses that completely ignored racial injustice. To illustrate, during the fourth lesson in the unit we read and dialogued about the consequences slaves endured for trying to escape to freedom in the Northern states. During the writing portion of the lesson, students were prompted to think critically about these issues from the perspective of a captured slave and to consider if they would have remained on the plantation or tried to escape to freedom. Students were also prompted to supply at least three reasons to justify their position and to provide an illustration that corresponds with their response. Interestingly, even after having discussed the consequences of racially unjust

institutions in society, several students still thought that it was more beneficial for the captured slaves to stay on the slave plantations than to escape to freedom. A salient example of how students avoided addressing issues of racial injustice in their written responses is seen in Figure 1.

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SLAVE RESISTANCE AND ESCAPE

Name _____

Directions: Tell 3 reasons why you would or would not try to escape if you were a slave. Draw a picture on the back to match.

I would try to escape because...	I would not try to escape because...
1.	1. I might get caught
2.	2. So I wed not bein whipped
3.	3. So I can have fun I seed do T see

I might get caught.

So I would not be whipped.

So I can have fun.

Figure 1. Repressive response.

Resistant Responses

In addition to developing a repressive response, students also developed what I refer to as a *resistant response*. Unlike the former type of response, in this type students openly opposed the racial injustice that existed in history. For example, in Lesson 3 my students and I read about and discussed many of the horrific events and atrocities associated with plantation life. Students were prompted to write a letter to a slave master from the perspective of a slave who was working on a plantation. Many students openly resisted the acts of racial injustice that were enacted by the slave masters. A salient example of this type of response is seen in Figure 2.

February 202007

Dear Slave Master,

please stop woing me.

please stop King me.

please stop boss me.

Sincerely

Please stop whipping me.
Please stop killing me.
Please stop bossing me.

Sincerely

Figure 2: Resistant response.

Retaliatory Responses

The third type of written response that students developed is what I refer to as a *retaliatory response*. In this type of response, students advocated using violence to avenge the racial injustice that was perpetuated against African Americans in history. A salient example of a retaliatory response is evident in Figure 3.

Name _____

Directions: Write three sentences to answer the question. Draw and color a picture to match on the back.

Journey To America

If you were a slave on a slave ship, what would you have done ?

First I would have hit them back.

Next I would have PUNISH them.

Last I would have PUT the shackles on them.

First I would have hit them back.

Next I would have punched them.

Last I would have put the shackles on them.

Figure 3. Retaliatory response.

Discussion and Implications

Data from this study suggest that early childhood teachers should provide a continuum of appropriate ways to combat social injustice in general and racial

Why did students respond the way they did?

Throughout the unit, students were asked to respond in writing to important historical events related to race and racism in the United States. Applying Bakhtin's (1981) notion of ideological becoming to explain the nature of the children's writing, we begin to see their writing as more than mere words on paper. Instead, Bakhtin's framework enables us to see the children's writing as a product of the interactions, conflicts, and ideological discourses that were presented throughout

the unit. In keeping with this theoretical construct, two ideological discourses were competing simultaneously throughout the unit. The broader critical, antiracist ideological discourse that was evident throughout much of children's literature selections and the classroom discussions positioned racism as something that should be actively combated by all members in society. In many ways, because the focus of the unit was on race and racism, this ideology could be considered to be what Bakhtin (1981) calls an *authoritative discourse*. In addition to this dominant and authoritative discourse, the students held internally persuasive ideologies related to race and racism prior to participating in the unit. For some students, their internally persuasive ideologies positioned race and racism as neutral concepts. Ultimately, these ideologies were altered, subverted, or strengthened as they participated in the classroom discussions and interacted with the texts presented in the unit.

Findings from this study present several important implications for early childhood teachers who endeavor to use antiracist writing activities to aid children in developing a critical consciousness of race and racism in society. First, data from this study suggest that early childhood teachers should provide a continuum of appropriate ways to combat social injustice in general and racial injustice in particular. In this study, students responded in ways that were quite consistent with the ideological discourses that were presented in the texts and discourses that emerged throughout the class discussions. Accordingly, many students wrote about using violence to avenge the violent acts that were perpetrated against African Americans in history. To help students consider multiple ways of responding to racial injustice, early childhood teachers should provide numerous models and methods for combating social injustices in society. In doing so, students begin to develop more complicated and nuanced ways of thinking about race and racism.

In as much as it is important for early childhood teachers to provide students with such models and methods for confronting racism, data from this study also suggests that early childhood teachers should teach children how to question racial injustice in various aspects of society. As mentioned previously, students frequently wrote repressive responses. In many of these responses, students did not critique the racial injustice that took place in history. To prevent students from becoming adults who passively accept racial injustice in society, early childhood teachers should teach their students to openly interrogate rules, procedures, practices, and laws around them for racial injustice.

A final implication that can be drawn from this study concerns action research in general. As seen in this study, action research can be used as a powerful tool for identifying and resisting

various forms of injustice within the classroom. In addition to using action research as a means of improving academic and social outcomes in and among students, action research can also be used as a means of interrogating and combating racial injustice. It is important to point out that this form of emancipatory action research (Carr & Kemmis, 2005) often embodies a host of political and ethical concerns and consequences. Hence, practitioners should carefully consider these issues and concerns prior to engaging in this form of practice and research.

Terry Husband is currently an assistant professor of early childhood education at Illinois State University in Normal, IL. Prior to this position, he taught in Columbus City Schools in Columbus, OH for over 10 years. His research interests include literacy development in African American boys and critical literacy in the early childhood classroom.

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Appendix A

Unit Topics and Writing Prompts

Lesson	Topics/Themes Examined	Texts Used	Writing Prompts
1	Origins and beginnings of slavery	If you lived when there was slavery in America The Middle Passage	<i>If I were being captured I would...</i>
2	Journey to America	Amistad Rising Now Let Me fly: The story of a slave family	<i>If you were a slave on a slave ship, what would you have done?</i>
3	Plantation life	Now Let Me fly: The story of a slave family If you lived when there was slavery in America	<i>Dear Slave Master,</i>
4	Slave resistance and escape	Almost to Freedom	<i>If you were a slave, would you try to escape? Why or why not?</i>
5	Anti-Slavery and Abolitionists movement	A Picture Book of Harriet Tubman	<i>If you were an abolitionist, how would you help the slaves?</i>
6	Civil War	If you lived when there was slavery in America	<i>Instead of having a war, what could they have done to solve the problem of slavery?</i>
7	Reconstruction	The Ku Klux Klan: A hooded brotherhood	<i>Dear Ku Klux Klan,</i>
8	Jim Crow	The Civil Rights Movement: Journal to freedom	<i>Do you think the college students should have stayed at the counter? Why or why not?</i>
9	Desegregation, civil protest, and freedom acquisition	If a bus could talk: The story of Rosa Parks	<i>Dear Rosa Parks,</i>

Appendix B

Frequency Chart of Written Responses

Lesson	Writing Prompts	Frequency of Repressive Responses	Frequency of Resistant Responses	Frequency of Retaliatory Responses	Total Number of Responses ¹
1	<i>If I were being captured I would...</i>	59%(16/27)	8%(2/27)	33%(9/27)	100% (27)
2	<i>If you were a slave on a slave ship, what would you have done?</i>	8% (2/26)	50%(13/26)	42%(11/26)	100% (26)
3	<i>Dear Slave Master,</i>	20%(5/25)	80%(20/25)	0%(0/25)	100% (25)
4	<i>If you were a slave, would you try to escape? Why or why not?</i>	26% (6/23)	74%(17/23)	0%(0/25)	100% (23)
5	<i>If you were an abolitionist, how would you help the slaves?</i>	14% (4/28)	86% (24/28)	0% (0/28)	100% (28)
6	<i>Instead of having a war, what could they have done to solve the problem of slavery?</i>	35% (9/26)	65% (17/26)	0% (0/26)	100% (26)
7	<i>Dear Ku Klux Klan,</i>	0% (0/25)	48% (12/25)	52%(13/25)	100%(25)
8	<i>Do you think the college students should have stayed at the counter? Why or why not?</i>	68%(19/28)	14%(4/28)	18%(5/28)	100%(28)
9	<i>Dear Rosa Parks,</i>	72%(18/25)	28%(7/25)	0%(0/25)	100% (25)
	<i>Dear Protestors</i>	0%(0/26)	96%(25/26)	4%(1/26)	100% (26)
Total		31% (79/259)	54%(141/259)	15%(39/259)	100% (259)

¹Total numbers of responses vary in each lesson due to fluctuations in student attendance.