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Cover Page Footnote

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“THEY NEED TO SAY SORRY:” RACIAL LITERACY AND ANTI-RACISM IN FIRST GRADE

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Abstract: Young children of color in the United States are experiencing the material effects of racism on a daily basis. There have been arguments for anti-bias and anti-racist education across the field of education, yet most recommendations are based on older students or studies in laboratory settings. In this critical ethnography, the author examined the wide variety of strategies one class of first graders used to learn about race and of the socio-political and racial climate in which they live. In this paper, the author argues that children carefully consider racial conditions in society and imagine anti-racist praxis as part of their racial inquiry.

In Ms. Wright’s class, a group of six- and seven-year-olds are crowded around a box of “multicultural crayons” with their teacher. They have been drawing self-portraits, and Ms. Wright has encouraged them to find the color that is just right to represent them. “It’s a little like picking makeup shades,” she said, and a few of the children giggled. Emily, looking through the colors, said, “You know, my Dad’s brown and my Mom’s white.” “I need a dark brown,” said Solange¹. Ms. Wright looked through the box and pulled out a dark brown, handing it to her, and said, “Here, I’m mocha.” Solange looked back and forth between the crayon, Ms. Wright, and her own skin, then colored a little on a scrap of paper nearby. Satisfied, Solange went back to her table. Emily picked a color and held it up for Ms. Wright to see. “You think you’re almond?” Ms. Wright asked. Emily nodded and smiled. Filo, joining the group, pointed to a color near Ms. Wright. “That one?” she asked him, pointing. “Yeah,” he said. “Chestnut!” she said and handed the color to him. He held it next to his hand, then returned to his seat to color.

In this moment, children used the available “multicultural crayons” to represent their skin tone. As they did so, they brought into the conversation observations about family members’ skin tone and attended to similarities between themselves and the teacher. Lessons like these are typical of what many in early childhood have come to expect for anti-bias or racial education in the classroom. In this type of activity, students are encouraged to use crayons, paper, or paints to develop self-knowledge and identify their particular shade of skin. Often, this activity is paired with other “celebrations of diversity” like having diverse materials in the classroom or reading a book which describes the beauty of various skin tones while reinforcing the message that all people are equal (Doucet & Adair, 2013).

However, lessons like this may inaccurately conflate race with phenotype, and do not take into account children’s own complex understanding of racialization (Park, 2011). Furthermore, researchers have argued that teaching or intervention strategies designed to address racial knowledge and counter bias often inadvertently promote color-blind ideology (Bonilla-Silva, 2017; Doucet & Adair, 2013; MacNevin & Berman, 2017). These strategies rely on developmentally appropriate practices, which Escayg (2018) argued, “can reproduce dominant perspectives on racism (i.e. the emphasis on [individual] prejudice)” by treating racism as a developmental issue rather than “a social, historical, cultural, and institutional” (p. 17) one.

More research is needed which details examples of anti-racist education in early childhood. In this article I argue that when anti-racist education is undertaken with knowledge of children’s lived experiences with race, children can demonstrate their knowledge of the workings of race and imagine forms of racial justice. I begin by briefly outlining what is currently known about young children’s racial knowledge and how they learn about race.

¹ All place and participant names have been replaced with pseudonyms. Most students chose their own pseudonyms, drawing on their personal interests and community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) as they did so. For instance, Solange and her friend Beyoncé chose their pseudonyms in honor of the musical artists Solange and Beyoncé Knowles, and Major Payne chose his pseudonym based on the 1995 movie of the same name.

Next, I present my current study, which expands on existing research through critical ethnographic (Madison, 2011) and video-cued methods (Adair & Kurban, 2019). I conclude by discussing the implications of students' strategies for anti-racist pedagogy.

Children's Racial Learning

Research conducted in young children's everyday settings, e.g. classrooms, has demonstrated that young children have extensive and nuanced conversations about race (Park, 2011; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). In conversations and play, young children recognize (Connolly, Smith, & Kelly, 2002), take up (MacNaughton & Davis, 2001; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001), and use their racialized experiences to inform their own racial identities (Connolly, 2002). They draw conclusions about the racial and ethnic identities of others based on multiple complex sources of information (Park, 2011), engaging in nuanced racial inquiry with their peers (Park, 2011).

Young children do not simply imitate what they hear or see about race in a haphazard manner, but apply their knowledge, modulate it based on the contexts, and try out interpretations with peers. In doing so, they are attentive and reactive to specific socio-historical contexts. Connolly's (1995) research in English and Northern Irish preschools demonstrated that young children's play did far more than imitate the sociohistorical contexts they experienced broadly. Preschoolers "appropriate, rework, and reproduce discourses on race, gender, and sexuality in quite complex ways" (Connolly, 2002, p. 187). For instance, children notice and draw on racialized language from current events, interpreting and applying them to new situations.

Every person in early childhood classrooms carries with them the individual and societal influences of race (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). However, Black and Latina/o/x² students particularly feel the effects of anti-darkness, which Bettina Love defined as "the social disregard for dark bodies and the denial of dark people's existence and humanity" (p. 14). They hear racialized stereotypes, language, and violence in and out of schools (Tatum, 2010), are subjected to messages of whiteness as normal and superior (Leonardo, 2009), and many live in fear of deportation (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2016). Young Black and Latina/o/x children experience racialized disciplinary practices in school and by the police as they are over-identified as "trouble-makers" and sentenced to harsher punishments in school and out than their white counterparts (e.g. Goff, Jackson, Di Leone, Culotta, & DiTomasso, 2014). Learning about race and how it impacts their lives is of essential importance for Black, Latina/o/x, and Asian American children. As Bettina Love (2019) argued,

Children of color attending schools that do not help them interpret the racist, sexist, Islamophobic, patriarchal, homophobic, transphobic, and xenophobic world in which they live is not only maintaining the status quo but also ensuring that Whiteness, patriarchy, and hate are never disrupted and challenged. (p. 86)

When schools do address racial education for young children, they locate issues of race and racism in the past, and rarely acknowledge children's own racial experiences except as part of a "celebration of diversity" (e.g. Chandler, 2015; Holmes, 2016).

Recognizing the crucial need for their children to know modern workings of race and power, families of Black and Latina/o/x children engage in racial education at home and in the community (Hughes & Chen, 1997; Reynolds, 2010). Racial socialization—developing racial pride, preparation for racial bias, and conversations about race—is practiced in at least two thirds of Black and Latina/o/x families (Hughes, 2003; Thornton, Chatters, Taylor, & Allen, 1990). In other words, Black and Latina/o/x children come to school with racial knowledge and an understanding of the workings of race and racism. While some studies explore high schoolers' use of racial funds of knowledge in schools (e.g. Stevenson, 2013), little is known about how young children draw on similar knowledge while learning about race in the classroom.

² In this paper I use the term Latina/o/x, rather than the more common Latino or Latinx. While Latinx has often been used as a gender-inclusive term, it was created as a term by and for those members of the Latina/o community with queer, non-binary, gender non-conforming, or trans* identities (Marqu ez, 2018). Additionally, I use the lower case white; as legal scholar Neil Gotanda wrote, white "is better left in lower case, rather than privileged with a capital letter. 'Black,' on the other hand, has deep political and social meaning as a liberating term, and, therefore, deserves capitalization" (Gotanda, 1991, p. 4), as does the proper noun Latina/o/x.

In this study, I examined six- and seven-year-olds' racial learning in their classroom contexts. In this article, I ask: How did first graders in Ms. Wright's class respond to narratives of symbolic violence? How do their sense-making practices reflect their understanding of race in society?

Context

Data for this article comes from Ms. Madeline Wright's first grade class at Cielo Early Learning Center. Ms. Wright's 16 students were 69% male and 31% female and identified racially as African American (50%), Latina/o/x (38%), and mixed race (12%). Ms. Wright identifies as a Black or Afro-Latina woman. Cielo Early Learning Center serves historically marginalized communities in Dos Ríos, an urban area in south Texas.

Data Sources

This critical ethnography (Madison, 2011) uses video-cued ethnographic methods (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989). In a video-cued ethnography, researchers conduct intensive observations, film in that setting, and create a short (15-20 minute) video to show to participants in interviews and focus groups. I spent over 100 hours in Ms. Wright's classroom, collecting multiple sources of data, including ethnographic, descriptive field notes (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011), artifacts, and video-recordings students' regular classroom work. I conducted both formal and informal interviews and focus groups with Ms. Wright and her students.

Analysis

My analysis drew on racial literacy as a theoretical lens in order to look for the patterns and trends of race in children's learning. Racial literacy is a process of understanding the mechanisms of race in society from a micro to a macro scale (Guinier, 2004; Twine, 2000, 2010). I intersect racial literacy with sociocultural theories of learning to consider how those trends emerge among young children within a school context.

Scholars taking a sociocultural approach note that social interaction is the basis of learning and development and so is contextual (Vygotsky, 1978). The motivation for learning is therefore deeply related to the "ongoing participation in a shared community existence" (p. 130). Learning, rather than occurring only in structured, formal situations, is "a process occurring within ongoing activity" (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003, p. 20). Recognizing this, in my study I considered how children learn race within the ongoing activities of school.

I re-read all field notes, transcribed the short videos, interviews, and focus groups and created a scene tracking document which describes each scene of the full-day filming. I inductively analyzed the data sources, with codes clustered through four questions: What did students do to learn about race (what strategies or techniques did they use)? Who did the work? What was it about (what was the topic or idea students addressed)? What made it possible (did it occur in a teacher lesson, during playtime, etc.)? I used the data analysis software DeDoose to identify students' strategies and deeply consider how those intersected with students' racial and gender identities, classroom context, and students' topics of interest. I then chose representative examples, noting and clarifying differences among themes.

Positionality

In conducting this research, I identify my own racial identity, privilege, and knowledge as an adult white woman, and critically interrogate its impact on this study and my participants. I sought methods which demonstrate my "commitment to people rather than ideas," which promote a humble approach to data collection (Madison, 2011), and which democratize data analysis by amplifying the expertise of participants (McManus et al., 2019). For example, I used video clips of students making sense of race and narratives of racial injustice in focus groups with students and in interviews with the teacher. Rather than relying primarily on my own understanding, participants' responses to videos became central to data analysis; I used their language and understanding to help shape my findings. The data here represents a fundamental argument made clear in focus groups and in this study—that children's own racial learning is more nuanced than previously accounted for, and that their racial literacy work is often centered both on understanding racialization and on taking action against injustice. I begin the next section by recounting at length a scene in which students discussed a picture book by Sharee Miller (2018) called *Don't Touch My Hair!*

Findings

Sitting with students at the community carpet space, Ms. Wright reminded the students about the idea of “respect my body and learning about bodies. And I know it doesn't just mean our physical bodies.” Ms. Wright retold a story that seven-year-old Beyoncé shared with her—an experience at a city council meeting in which a white person touched her hair. “She said, ‘Ms. Wright I don't like it when they touch my hair without asking.’ I said, ‘Girl, I know.’ I was at [the grocery store] and you know I was on my scooter so I couldn't reach very high, and I was reaching up towards the top shelf to try and get something and this man came over. I thought he was going to help me out, get what I was reaching for. But here came his hand toward me.” Ms. Wright leaned her head back, raised her eyebrows and opened her eyes wide as she held her hand out in front of her face as if it was someone else's hand approaching her. “And his hand went--” She thrust her hand into her hair and squeezed it a few times. “He put his hand right in my hair and then got down what I was reaching for.” Ms. Wright reminded students that just like we want people to respect our bodies, we also need them to respect our hair, and reached into her bag to pull out a book called “Don't Touch My Hair!”

Ms. Wright pointed at the main character and said, “This is Aria and she's real cute.” Mikey said, “That's a lot of hair.” As Ms. Wright read, several students begin to lay down or lean back, many of them touching their own hair as she read. “Oh, she got her hair in a poof!” said Serena. Ms. Wright nodded, adding, “Many of you ladies wear your hair like that in an Afro puff, or some of you put it in box braids. Ms. Wright wears her hair down, although I have an Afro wig too.” Major Payne said, “Ms. Anna [the researcher] has that hair too!” “Yes, she does,” said Ms. Wright. She continued to read. In the story, the main character Aria ran away when people kept touching her hair without permission. Ms. Wright paused. “How is Aria feeling?” “Scared!” says Serena, while other students said, “Sad.” “Nervous,” added Beyoncé. Filo pointed at the illustration, indicating a lady with very light skin who was touching Aria's hair, saying, “Ms. Wright, she's happy, though.” Ms. Wright nodded. “Even though she (indicating the lady) is happy, Aria is not feeling the same way.” In the text, Aria ran to get away from people trying to touch her hair. Eventually, the character went to outer space to get away from people trying to touch her hair, and Ms. Wright said, “You know she became an astronaut like Mae Jemison.” Beyoncé replied, “She's sad because everyone's chasing her to touch her hair.”

“What would you tell her?” Ms. Wright asked. Filo announced: “I would distract the humans and run away from the people.” Ms. Wright tilted her head to the side and asked, “Should you have to run away?” Beyoncé suggested, “She could braid it.” Mikey said, “I would tell them to please stop chasing me and don't touch my hair until you ask.” Other students called out their responses, saying, “Run away!” and “I would've just let them do it and get away.”

Ms. Wright nodded and suggested, “Let's see what she does.” Before she could continue, Solange said, “She could hide her hair with her jacket.” Next to her, Beyoncé announced, “I wouldn't let anyone touch my hair. I would karate chop their hand.” Mikey rose up on his knees and grinned, then said “I would say, ‘If you touch my hair you have to give me five hundred bucks.’” The kids began to call out amounts, rising up on their knees like Mikey. “One thousand!” “One hundred dollars!” “Ten thousand dollars!” “Twenty thousand dollars!” Some of them grinned, while others did not.

Ms. Wright raised her eyebrows and smiled. “Oh, y'all would tell them they have to pay you! Would you like to know what she does?” She continued the story, reading how Aria finally lost her temper and yelled, “DON'T TOUCH MY HAIR!” “When people get tired of the disrespect, they fuss at you and they yell at you. It feels sad when people yell,” said Ms. Wright. Beyoncé furrowed her brow and said, “But they were doing something to her!”

Ms. Wright continued to read aloud as the main character explained to the onlookers not to touch her hair without asking. In the illustration the onlookers had small frowns on their faces and looked somewhat chagrined. “How are they feeling now?” asked Ms. Wright. “They're thinking,” said Filo. Beyoncé added, “They're reflecting on what they did.” Solange listened to her friends' responses; the corners of her mouth turned down slightly. Then she said, “They *need* to say sorry.” (Field notes, January 25, 2019)

In this scene, Ms. White used the book for dual purposes. On one level, she used the text to help students build their English/language arts skills. They discussed setting, character feelings and change across the story, problem and solution as part of the plot. However, because Ms. Wright framed the text with Beyoncé's and her own real experiences, she emphasized the larger purpose of inviting students to make sense of the racialized interaction of hair-touching. This racialized interaction is an example of what Johnson, Bryan, and Boutte (2019) called symbolic violence. Symbolic violence is anti-Black behavior that, while not physically violent, is harmful and “reject[s] the experiences and lived realities of Black youth” (p. 7). Johnson et al. (2019) argue that attitudes and behaviors which have often been characterized as micro-aggressions (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000) may be

better understood as anti-Black violence and are often enacted on Black children under the guise of affection, as is often the case with hair-touching. *Don't Touch My Hair!* does not explicitly address hair-touching as a racist behavior, perpetrated often by white people against Black girls and women; instead, the text shows Aria moving away from hands of many different shades. While the text treated hair-touching through a color-evasive lens (Annamma, Jackson, & Morrison, 2017), discussion of the text occurred in the context of both Beyoncé's and Ms. Wright's experiences as a Black girl and black woman. If we examine this scene through a lens of racial literacy, we can see ways in which students made sense of the narrative and then imagined possibilities for themselves and others (Love, 2019).

"Oh, she got her hair in a poof!"

For Black girls and women, hair-touching—"becoming the focus of curiosity with people invading personal space to touch one's hair" (DeLongoria, 2018, p. 60)—is a common instance of symbolic violence (Johnson et al., 2019), as evidenced by seven-year-old Beyoncé's experiences. In this section, I discuss how Black and Latina/o/x students worked to make sense of hair-touching by sharing racialized knowledge and using perspective taking skills.

As Ms. Wright read the story, Mikey, a Black boy, Serena, a mixed-race Black and Filipina girl, and Major Payne, a Black boy, all commented on the character Aria's hair. Serena drew on her own knowledge of natural hairstyles to identify Aria's hairstyle as a "poof." Although Ms. Wright used slightly different vocabulary in her response ("Afro-puff"), Serena's vocabulary was representative of conversations around hairstyles that occurred among students in the classroom; Serena drew on community terminology in her comment. Major Payne's response, that, "Ms. Anna has that hair too," suggested he was attending to similarities in hair texture across races. Across my time in the classroom, Major Payne and I had multiple conversations about hair texture—in particular, what he called the "looseness" of my type 3A/3B curls as opposed to the "tight curls" (e.g. type 4A, 4B, or 4C) ("Hair Types | NaturallyCurly.com," n.d.) of several of his Black classmates and his mother (Field Notes, February 22, 2019). Knowledge of natural hairstyles and differences and similarities in hair texture has been theorized as being "connected to geography and histories that are rooted in the construction of race, difference, and political violence" (Adkins, 2016, pp. 41-42). Students' responses specifically drew on their racialized knowledge, which they used to understand the main character, Aria, as experienced racialized interactions because of her hair.

Filo, a Latino boy, and Beyoncé, a Black girl, demonstrated perspective taking skills across this lesson. As other students considered the main characters' feelings, Filo physically and verbally tried to make sense of the differences between the main character's feelings and those of people who were touching her hair. Filo pointed at the illustration and said, "Ms. Wright, she's happy, though." In doing so, he drew attention to the emotional power differences between the person invading Aria's personal space, who was depicted as happy, and Aria herself, who students described as feeling sad or scared. Beyoncé, in turn, redirected Ms. Wright's comment comparing Aria to Mae Jemison, the first Black woman astronaut, to focus on what she knew to be Aria's true feelings in that situation (Beyoncé Interview, May 22, 2019) by saying, "She's sad because everyone's chasing her to touch her hair." Beyoncé's redirection to a more serious discussion supports an understanding that Black women's hair is connected to issues of identity, racial politics, and resistance (Patton, 2006). In both cases, students pivoted conversation to consider multiple points of view, informing their understanding of power differentials in the interaction.

Viewing students' work through a socio-cultural theory of learning allows us to recognize this discussion as part of a cultural repertoire. Gutierrez and Rogoff (2003) noted the importance of attending to such linguistic and cultural repertoires, or, "the ways of engaging in activities stemming from observing and otherwise participating in cultural practices" (p. 22). In other words, through observation and participation, students accessed community funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) which they then carried into a setting outside their home or community. As Ms. Wright noted, "One day they asked me about my wig and said, 'Is it a lace-front?' I was like, 'How do you know about lace-fronts?' Well, they told me they go to the beauty supply store with their mamas. So they know all about it" (Interview, April 25, 2019). Major Payne, Filo, and Serena drew not only on individual racialized knowledge, but the collective knowledge of their community to make sense of this interaction.

"They need to say sorry."

Students' responses to the main character demonstrated both their recognition of the power imbalance in the interaction and their capabilities to imagine ways in which that imbalance might be countered. Students advocated or suggested action for the victim, recommended action for the aggressor, and applied the scenario to their own lives to consider what actions they would have wanted.

When Ms. Wright initially asked students what they would tell Aria, they focused on ways Aria could adapt or get away from the situation, including distracting humans, running away, and hiding her hair with her jacket. Beyoncé noted, “She could braid [her hair].” This initial reaction focused on ways in which Aria could take care of Wright acknowledged that Aria yelled because she was “tired of the disrespect.” When Ms. Wright added that it would make people feel sad for her to respond by “fussing” and yelling, Beyoncé shifted the conversation by arguing, “But they were doing something to her!” Rather than focus on the people being yelled at, Beyoncé redirected attention on Aria’s experiences, suggesting that being able to “fuss” at someone mistreating you was a reasonable response to injustice. Solange also demonstrated understanding of justice. When others pointed out the characters’ reflection, Solange pushed for something more—an apology. Solange’s response suggests a desire not just for people to acknowledge injustice, but to take clear responsibility for their actions. In doing so, Solange has demonstrated how she imagines justice. Referencing Kelley’s *Freedom Dreams*, Love (2019) wrote, “...freedom dreaming for intersectional justice is what movements are made of; they start off as freedom dreams molded by resistance, self-determination, and struggle” (p. 103). We can attend to Solange’s freedom dreaming, then, as both a guide for the kind of racial justice we should strive for, and as part of a larger movement built around accountability and justice.

In Ms. Wright’s class, Beyoncé and Solange were positioned as leaders, and both their peers and the teacher frequently turned to them to help solve interpersonal conflict. This is in stark contrast to many experiences of young Black girls, wherein teachers encourage Black girls to demonstrate more docile, traditionally white forms of femininity (Morris, 2007). In Ms. Wright’s class, as in other Black feminist spaces, Black girls’ participation in the classroom community was built around communal care (Collins, 2002; Knight & Watson, 2014; Vickery, 2015). As evidenced by this vignette, that included an emphasis on solidarity with other Black girls and women. Beyoncé considered how she would respond, yet she and Solange continued to speak about Aria rather than shifting entirely to their own perspective. Furthermore, focus group interviews revealed that Solange defended Beyoncé when a child in another class mocked Beyoncé’s hair. Beyoncé defended and justified Aria’s self-advocacy; Solange imagined a form of justice which was not included in the text but had been effective in their own experiences.

Finally, students applied the scenario—and their understanding of it, cultivated through sharing racial knowledge, taking perspectives, and considering action both for the victim and by the aggressors—to their own lives. Mikey first suggested that, “I would tell them to please stop chasing me and don’t touch my hair until you ask.” Soon after, Mikey gave a seemingly playful response: “If you touch my hair you have to give me five hundred bucks.” Mikey’s words, though somewhat joking, reveal an understanding of the importance of money in how race operates in America. Mikey’s response points to both the original power imbalance of the symbolic violence and the potential for re-adjusting the balance of power through economic means. In advocating for financial compensation, Mikey imagined a possibility in which he might gain an advantage within the means by which race and power operate in the United States (Omi & Winant, 2014). Once he publicly imagined this possibility, others took it up for their own use, imagining larger and larger amounts of money.

Mikey’s comments demonstrate a recognition of the ways in which race operates through economic means in society (Leonardo, 2013). Mikey did not explicitly reference experiences with economic inequality. However, his comments suggest Mikey considered the role of money as a tool for power imbalance. In Ms. Wright’s class, Mikey was well-respected for his ideas and his questions, which often prompted class discussion and extended racial inquiry. Support of Mikey’s agency was in stark contrast to the experiences of many Black boys who have historically been positioned as either delinquent and prone to misbehave (e.g. Dumas & Nelson, 2016) or infantilized and not taken seriously. Here, Mikey’s plan for action prompted others to join in and imagine a solution together.

Discussion

Epstein and Gist (2015) argued that racial literacy “Provides opportunities to understand how power and privilege operate among and within racialized lines” (p. 43). In this article, I consider how the idea of racial literacy might couple with anti-racist pedagogy. Students in Ms. Wright’s class demonstrated that, when given the opportunity, they draw on their community funds of knowledge (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003; Moll et al., 1992) to develop racial literacy for anti-racist praxis. That is, by using sense-making practices which drew on their racially specific knowledge and experience, they were able to “interpret racial codes and racialized practices” (Twine, 2010, p. 92) and to imagine possibilities for racial justice.

Students engaged in the imaginative work of what Robin D. Kelley (2002) called “freedom dreaming.” Freedom dreaming, as Kelley argued, involves the “unleashing of the mind’s most creative capacities, catalyzed by participation in struggles for change” (p. 191). Beyoncé, Solange, Mikey, Serena, and their classmates demonstrated their understanding that outside their classroom people of color operate in a society entrenched in anti-darkness (Love, 2019). In imagining their responses to anti-Black symbolic violence, and in seeking redress, Ms. Wright’s students worked counter to normalized, anti-dark experiences. Love (2019) noted that, “Dark children are retained, deemed academically malignant, and pushed out of schools with limited tools to survive” (p. 102). This is particularly informed by their age—as Black and Latina/o/x first graders, the current educational system positions them as powerless, and their ideas as unimportant. In Ms. Wright’s class, however, they claimed forms of agency not traditionally granted to them in the classroom, including seeking compensation and advocating on behalf of people in their community (both fictional and not).

This work was made possible because Ms. Wright’s first grade class was what bell hooks described as a pedagogical “homeplace” (hooks, 1990). A homeplace is a site of resistance in which African Americans (and in this case also Latina/o/x and Black/Asian American students) “could strive to be subjects, not objects ... be affirmed in ... minds and hearts ... [and] restore ... the dignity denied ... on the outside in the public world” (hooks, 1990, p. 44). In this space, Ms. Wright encouraged and took seriously students’ racial inquiry. She emphasized student agency across the day (Adair, 2014). She taught lessons on Black and Latinx anti-racist activism. Finally, Ms. Wright responded to students’ personal stories about symbolic violence by helping them to process and historicize their experiences.

When Black and Brown children learn in a classroom community that is a pedagogical homeplace, they draw on their own experiences, cultural community wealth (Yosso, 2005), and new information provided by the teacher to deeply consider their oppressive conditions and imagine solutions. In Ms. Wright’s class, children’s racial and ethnic group identities were often affirmed; students moved beyond simply celebrating differences to “highlight the complex interrelationship between power, difference, and inequity” (Doucet & Adair, 2013, p. 91). In other words, they engaged in racial inquiry, building their racial literacy, with an anti-racist approach. For students from historically marginalized communities, learning about race through an anti-racist lens is a crucial act. When we take Black and Latina/o/x children’s thinking about race seriously, we see how their work is not just related to their individual identities, but to the enactment of power in the broader society.

Going forward, racial pedagogy should begin by asking educators and researchers to closely observe and take seriously the racial inquiry work of young children. In addition, scholars and teachers of anti-racist pedagogy need to recognize the ways in which young children’s racial literacy is crucial to develop modes of anti-racist action. Rather than treat racial literacy as an isolated concept, we need to better recognize the ways that even young children draw on their racial literacy to imagine possibilities for action. When we better recognize the links between students’ racial literacy and their anti-racist praxis, we can shift our own work to support the anti-racist activism which students have already begun.

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