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DEVELOPING A VOCABULARY TO TALK ABOUT RACE IN THE WHITE HOME: ONE FAMILY'S EXPERIENCE

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Abstract: Studies have shown white parents actively avoid talking about race as the primary method of racial socialization of their white children (Bartoli et al., 2016; Pahlke, Bigler, & Suizzo, 2012). This limits children's ability to talk about and therefore think about race in nuanced ways, resulting in white children who consider their own race meaningless and do not identify racially (Bartoli et al., 2016). Antiracist education breaks these white discourse norms, and directly addresses systemic racism (Escayg, 2018). This paper describes how one white family attempted to enact antiracist education in the home with a focus on developing a shared and accurate racial vocabulary. Within this context, two white children, aged five to eleven years during the study, initially confounded skin color and race, created race labels for people of Color to describe proximity to Blackness, learned to call themselves white, developing an understanding that being white comes with power and relative safety.

When my white son was transitioning from preschool in a pristine white suburb to kindergarten in our multiracial neighborhood, he said, "Will there be brown kids there?" I answered, "Yes." He replied, "I don't want to go." Concerned, I told his preschool teacher about this exchange. She said, "He's just nervous about going to a new school. Don't worry."

I did worry. How did my son learn to fear "brown kids"? Why was his white teacher so dismissive of this exchange? What could I do to change the racist trajectory my five-year-old son was already on? The same year my son started kindergarten, I began pursuing my doctoral degree in early childhood education at an institution with a social justice mission. Slowly, I gained understanding of the ways in which race operates and how notions of white supremacy might be countered in early childhood. Equipped with beginners' knowledge of antiracist pedagogy, my husband and I knew we could not wait and began implementing antiracist education in our home. In this article, I share one aspect of the curriculum we enacted with our two white children over the course of nearly four years: learning accurate racial labels and definitions of race.

Learning Race through Language, a Tool for Thinking

Language is a tool of the mind used to organize concepts and develop abstract ideas (Vygotsky, 1978). Language is also cultural. Words are socially constructed, layered with historical and context-specific meanings, therefore no word is politically neutral (Leonardo & Manning, 2015; Park, 2001). Children use words before they understand their full social meaning (Leonardo & Manning, 2015; Vygotsky, 1986) and employ them in social settings to further develop definitions and gauge social implications (Park, 2011; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). Once children achieve inner speech so that *the syntax of thought is the syntax of words*, they use language to learn in much the same way adults do (van der Veer & Zandershevna, 2018; Vygotsky, 1986).

Race, a social construction that continuously makes meaning from human difference in order to justify and maintain power differentials, is (re)created through language. "People construct race when they classify, categorize, and label" (Wetzel & Rogers, 2015, p. 28). Racial labels, the words we use to identify each other and ourselves racially, are important tools in the racial system. Leonardo and Manning (2015) assert, "Words (as units of meaning) become sites of interplay between the individual and the social, where people learn to see through the categories and generalizations determined by their social context" (p. 7).

Stunted Racial Literacy Development Amid Color Evasiveness

While white American parents have been found to teach their children vocabulary directly and have even been known to quiz their children on new vocabulary (Rogoff, 2003), they are unlikely to teach their children words

to understand race. Instead, white children are typically socialized indirectly by families through the products, advertisements, children's literature and television programming present in the home (Miller, 2015); as well as who is invited into their homes (Vitrup & Holden, 2010); and how their family members respond to people of Color they encounter in the community (Miller, 2015). When racial socialization is left up to popular media and passive observation of the practices of the white family, children are likely to learn fear, pity, and stereotypes due to racial segregation and the underrepresentation and misrepresentation of people of Color in popular media, including children's literature, (Miller, 2015). Color evasiveness (Annamma, Jackson, & Morrison, 2017), the tendency to avoid directly talking about race with the false premises that race is no longer important and noticing race is an aspect of racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), is a pervasive white discourse norm that serves to maintain white supremacy while upholding the façade of white innocence (Annamma et al., 2017). Studies have shown white parents actively avoid talking about race as the primary method of racial socialization of their white children (Bartoli et al., 2016; Pahlke, Bigler, & Suizzo, 2012; Vitrup & Holden, 2010). This limits children's ability to talk and think about race in nuanced and accurate ways (Leonardo & Manning, 2015) and erases America's history of racism that continues to permeate the culture (Annamma et al., 2017), resulting in white children who consider their own race meaningless and deny the racialized experiences of People of Color (Bartoli et al., 2016).

In contrast to color evasiveness and the dysconsciousness it produces, critical racial literacy is the ability "to recognize, refute, critique, and synthesize the structure of race in daily living" (Nash et al., 2018, p. 260). Racial literacy "requires us to rethink race as an instrument of social, geographic, and economic control" (Guinier, 2004, p. 114). Due to early and persistent socialization into notions of white supremacy and dominant narratives that recognize racism on the individual rather than systemic level (Nash et al., 2018; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001), it is important to promote racial literacy at an early age. This requires that teachers and parents be racially literate themselves.

Early Education for Racial Literacy: Parent Crit and Antiracist Education

Critical Race Parenting (CRP), also known as Parent Crit, is an educational praxis that recognizes the changing and context-specific ways in which race operates by "engag[ing] both parent and child in a mutual process of teaching and learning about race" (Matias, 2016, p. 3). CRP requires "pointing out race, class, and gender dynamics to debunk the illusion of their invisibility and neutrality" (DePouw & Matias, 2016, p. 251). CRP is grounded in parenting practices of People of Color who have a long history of "teaching resilience and resistance" (DePouw & Matias, 2016, p. 247) in a society that devalues and enacts violence upon their children. For white parents, CRP involves "acknowledg[ing] their complex relationships to [w]hiteness as a personal and social identity because this is the context for their critical race parenting" (DePouw, 2018, p. 56).

While CRP centers on racial literacy in the home, antiracist education is applied to classroom praxis. Antiracist education moves beyond the anti-bias framework, which is designed to diminish all prejudice at the individual level and is widely accepted in the field of early childhood education. In contrast, antiracist education addresses systemic racism in particular and acknowledges both the material and psychological advantages incurred by dominant groups (Escayg, 2018; Escayg, Berman, & Royer, 2017). Antiracist education rejects the widely held assumption that teaching about institutional racism is not developmentally appropriate, by questioning notions of normative development and asserting "racism is not a developmental issue" (Escayg, 2018, p. 17). In recognition that "institutional racism and [w]hite supremacy are flexible and subject to change—therefore, universal answers or solutions are impossible" (DePouw & Matias, 2016, p. 255), neither CRP nor antiracist curricula designate rigid subject matter. However, both curricular frameworks recognize the importance of language and advocate for accurate language and clear definitions that "empower [our] children with the racial knowledge and vocabulary that can better deconstruct, resist, and defy dominant discourse of race" (Matias, 2016, p. 28).

Examining Antiracist Pedagogy through Parent Child Autoethnography

This paper draws from a larger parent child autoethnography that took place in Kansas City, Missouri from 2015 to 2019. Autoethnography is a research method that uses ethnographic techniques to connect the "personal to the cultural, social, and political," (Ellis, 2004, p. xix). This work to clarify the relationships between one's own life and the influences of the larger cultural milieu "allows for both personal and cultural critique" (Boylorn, Orbe, & Ellis, 2013, p. 17), a movement toward critique of self rather than critique of others, which is a harmful white discourse norm (Micheal, 2015). While autoethnography applies ethnographic methodology to the self, parent child ethnographies "provide insights into the life experiences of their child-participants and the complexity to which

daily activities are constructed through a cultural framework” (Kabuto & Martens, 2014, p. 2). This methodological combination broadens the “multiple data collection methods and sources” (Long & Long, 2014, p. 134) required by parent child ethnography to include the personal experiences of the parent that influence curricular decision-making. Data sources for this study include field notes, audio recordings of conversations and readings of children’s literature, and child-made artifacts. Autoethnography adds intensive personal journaling and the collection of artifacts that have influenced one’s own thinking to the list of data sources (Denzin, 2013). This methodology is well positioned to “contribute to the currently limited body of literature about young [w]hite children’s construction of understandings of race” (Miller, 2015, p. 37).

Context

While parent child autoethnography reveals larger cultural norms, it is intimately personal and context specific, revealing how those norms play out in micro interactions set in a particular time and place. Thus it is important to examine the cultural and geographical context of Kansas City, Missouri. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (n.d.), the population is 55.5% white, 28.7% Black, 10% Latino, 3.3% biracial, and 2.8% Asian. In this setting, race is often defined by a Black/white binary. Kansas City is infamous for the so-called *Troost divide*, the persistent Black/white racial residential division along *Troost Avenue* founded in real estate practices and school boundary maps designed to perpetuate racial segregation (Gotham, 2002). When my children were in preschool, before formal data collection, we crossed Troost Avenue every day to get to the pristine suburb where their nearly all white preschool was located and where I worked. My children’s transitions from this white preschool setting to the multiracial elementary school in our neighborhood was an important part of their racial meaning making. While we had a Kansas City address during the three years and seven months of the study, we lived in a first-tier suburb that was outside of the Kansas City school district boundary. The demographics of our neighborhood elementary school reflected the changing demographics of the larger suburb. In 2000, 11.8% of students were Black, 0% were Hispanic, and 85.0% were white. In 2017, 44.1% of the students were Black, 8.7% were Hispanic, and 38.1% were white (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2016). My children began kindergarten in 2013 and 2015. Despite the increasing racial diversity of the students (due to white flight), the teaching staff continued to be overwhelmingly white and female, mirroring national statistics (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

Participants

Participants for this study include myself, my husband, my daughter (aged five to nine years during the study), and my son (aged seven to eleven years during the study). Each of us is white and has lived in Missouri all of our lives thus far. I do not use my family members’ names in publication, and all other names used are pseudonyms.

Data Analysis

The purpose of the larger study was to better understand how white families might enact antiracist education in the home, and the central research question asked how my children construct and express understandings of race in the context of the home curriculum. Qualitative analysis of the large data set was “a continuous, iterative enterprise” (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013, p. 14) consisting of repeated listening, viewing, and reading of data. Data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously throughout the study resulting in the emergence of patterns and themes and nascent answers to the research question (Miles et al., 2013). As the data set grew and themes emerged, I created thematic tables to “permit a viewing of the full data set in the same location” (Miles et al., 2013, p. 108). These tables were organized chronologically and included dates, the children’s ages, salient quotes, and thematic notes. While member checking occurred throughout the study, at the close of the study I confirmed and clarified major findings with my children and my husband, their father.

Findings

In this paper I present findings around racial labels, an influential component of racial discourse. These words are soaked with social, political, and historical meaning that “saturates thinking from the earliest stages of development, coloring the experiences and perceptions of children” (Leonardo & Manning, 2015, p. 7). I found my children constructed and expressed understandings of race using the racial labels made available to them. Specifically they confounded skin color and race and created racial labels to describe proximity to Blackness. As a

result of antiracist home curriculum, they also began to name themselves as white and envision an antiracist white identity.

Confounding Skin Color and Race

When my children first encountered skin color differences in their classmates, they responded by describing such differences using both color words and racialized discourse, indicating that they not only noticed the physical difference, they also attributed social meaning to such difference. Their race talk was influenced by their color vocabulary as well as their observations of racial discourse in the larger culture. In our community and the larger context of the United States, the racial labels Black and white are often used. It is important to note that black and white are also color words children typically learn to be opposites in their early education as this signals the black/white racial binary that defines racial discourse in our context. Further, my children, like many others in the context of the United States, learned the words peach, tan, and brown as colors found in the crayon box and used to draw and color in physical features.

As described in the opening vignette, when preparing for kindergarten my son asked with trepidation if there would be *brown kids* at school. Due to my own socialization, I immediately interpreted his phrase to mean Black children. My son's inquiry indicated a learned fear of people with brown skin, a beginning understanding of race as it operates in a culture that criminalizes Black people in general and Black boys in particular. It seems he was socialized to fear Black people in the absence of direct talk about people of Color through media images, life in racially segregated spaces such as his preschool, and by observing white people's nonverbal communications about Black people. When my daughter entered kindergarten, she also engaged in talk that indicated a curiosity about skin color as well as an understanding of its social meaning. During that time, we watched the 2014 movie rendition of *Annie* in which Annie is played by a young African American girl with brown skin. My daughter and I had the following exchange during a car drive on September 30, 2015.

My Daughter: Annie is Black. We watched a movie of it. She is Black.

Myself: What does that mean?

My Daughter: Wait, she is brown.

Myself: Yeah. Her skin is brown. (I did not provide a definition of the racial label Black here.)

...

Yeah, do you have friends like that at school? (I asked wondering what had made my daughter bring up the movie she had seen several weeks ago.)

My Daughter: No.

Myself: Do you have friends with brown skin at school?

My Daughter: Mm-mm. (indicating no)

Myself: Are there kids in your class who have brown skin?

My Daughter: (nods)

Myself: Yeah, are they your friends?

My Daughter: No.

Myself: Why not?

My Daughter: I don't know.

Myself: What color is Jabari? What color skin does he have? (I asked remembering the name she had mentioned several times that I had perceived to be African American.)

My Daughter: Him is not in my class.

Myself: Oh. But he is your friend. What color skin does he have?

My Daughter: The same color.

Myself: The same color as who?

My Daughter: The Black, wait brown, brown.

Myself: He has brown skin. See you have friends who have brown skin.

My Daughter: No, I mean, I mean Jabari is my best friend who has brown skin.

Myself: Yeah.

My Daughter: Only one skin friend I have at this school, but him's not in my class.

Here it seems my five-year-old daughter was seeking to understand the relationship between skin color and race through her use of both racial labels and color words. Her talk indicated she understood the importance our society places on skin color and my talk indicated the anxiety I felt around promoting positive relationships between my white children and their classmates of Color. I had rare opportunity as a child to develop cross-racial friendships and I understood their importance in the healthy racial identity development of my children (Bartoli et al., 2016;

Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). Our cultural anxieties around cross racial friendships are especially evident in the phrase “skin friend” and were on display several months later when a Black coworker came to our garage sale. My then six-year-old daughter commented, “It doesn’t matter if she is Brown and you are white, I mean peach. You can still be friends.” This anecdote also serves as another example of using words to indicate skin color as a stand in for racial labels.

While both of my children demonstrated an understanding of the importance our society places on race and used color words to describe race at five years old, I understand this to be related to their experiences attending school with children of Color where color evasiveness defined classroom culture, rather than a developmental stage they arrived at naturally. Van Ausdale & Feagin (2001) found that preschool age children used racial and ethnic labels such as Black, white, African, and Chinese when they attended a multicultural preschool where teachers used such labels while Beneke & Cheatham (2019) found preschool age children attending a multiracial school used color words to describe race when their teachers encouraged such words through read alouds of multicultural literature and discussions of children’s own skin tones. Children use the language that is available to them to make sense of the world they encounter in social interactions and this language shapes their understanding of race.

My children’s use of color words to describe racial dynamics indicates a surface understanding of race and its role in our community. However, the talk has no political or historical depth to help my children understand *how* skin color came to be so important. Racial discourse absent of a historicopolitical perspective might lead children to believe that skin color is associated with inherent rather than social differences and is inadequate for antiracist education. Using color labels rather than racial labels is a means of color evasiveness. Color labels reduce race to skin color and erase important historical and political identifications. While race is often equated with skin color, race is a much more complex construct. Race is associated with ethnicity and skin color but “has its genesis and maintains its vigorous strength in the realm of social beliefs” (Haney Lopez, 1955, p. 200) that serve to maintain power differentials. Depending on context, racial categories might also be associated with language, religion, and personal style (Alim, 2016; Kromidas, 2014). Further, the use of brown as a color word to describe Black people is problematic because some South Asian, Latinx, Northern African, and Biracial people identify racially as Brown (Harpalani, 2015, Roth-Gordon, 2016).

Initially, and in error, I used the color words my children utilized to talk with them about race in an attempt to preserve their innocence and to avoid racing their new friends. Gradually, my husband and I began using racial labels in talk with our children, recognizing they had already raced their friends by labeling them with color words and we were denying them deeper understanding of race. Our transition to racial labels was supported by children’s literature, neighborhood friends, community cultural events, and political movements such as Black Lives Matter.

For example, on June 21, 2016, my husband and I sought to deepen our children’s understanding of the racial label Black with a family reading of *Shades of Black: A Celebration of Our Children* (Pinkney, 2000), a book that features photographs of Black children with many skin tones and hair textures and features the refrain, *I am Black. I am unique*. During the family reading, both children, ages six and eight years at the time, exhibited confusion and disbelief that someone with light skin might identify as Black, demonstrating the need for such curriculum. Along with conversation about African ancestry, I pointed out the difference between a color word and a racial label in the text, “And this word Black with a capital B, that doesn’t really mean what color they are, right? Cause they don’t all have black skin, right?” This conversation was one of many interactions over several years that lead to our family’s exclusive use of racial labels rather than color words to describe race.

A diversity of perspectives in curricular materials and sources is essential to achieving a more accurate and nuanced understanding of racial terms and meanings; “both children and teachers make meaning of the topic of race, and language (a symbolic tool) in talk, and texts mediate knowledge production” (Beneke & Cheatham, 2019, p. 111). It is especially important for white teachers and parents to utilize curricular sources created by People of Color as these sources more likely contain accurate racial definitions (Hefflin, 2001). Ultimately, we can’t leave children floundering trying to understand race and how to talk about it on their own. Due to the white supremacy endemic in our society, if we do not teach and define accurate racial labels directly, our children will learn white supremacy indirectly.

Creating Racial Labels to Describe Proximity to Blackness

While my husband and I taught our children about the racial labels Black and white, we did not initially teach other racial or ethnic labels. Thus, when our children sought to label people racially who they perceived as neither white nor Black, they relied on the language of the racial binary they had been taught and their understanding of grammar to invent words to describe race. On January 27, 2017, when my daughter was in first grade, she described Jamiya, a girl with dark brown skin and box braids as *Brown*, Fernando, a boy with tan skin and straight black hair who I have observed speaking Spanish as *kind of Brown*, and Tushar who identifies as East Indian

as *kind of Brown*. Notice the phrase *kind of Brown* seems to indicate that someone's race is *kind of like* the Black race. If she were seeking to describe skin tone that is not quite brown, she might use the familiar color words *tan* or *light brown*. My daughter's lack of a racial or ethnic identity label for her friends at school indicates those identifications were not being discussed at school or at home.

Similarly, on July 24, 2016 during a rushed side conversation, my eight-year-old son described a relative by marriage as *Blackish*.

My Son: I didn't know Jason was [my cousin's] brother.

Myself: Jason and [your cousin] have the same mom and different dads.

My Son: That's weird. Is Jason's family Black?

Myself: No, his dad is Latino.

My Son: Do those people look Black?

Myself: Brown.

My Son: So that's why Jason looks Blackish?

When my son said, "So that's why Jason looks Blackish" he was not describing Jason's skin color as *blackish*; he was describing Jason as someone who has physical features somewhat similar to those of a Black person and different from a white person. This is especially notable as Jason has straight black hair and light skin that tans easily. I had always perceived him to be white.

Moves to describe racial identity in terms of proximity to Blackness are reflective of the larger culture of the U.S. and Kansas City in particular. The Black/white binary "reflects a process of negative and positive racialization that is a symbolic matrix (of inclusion and exclusion) that incorporates other racial/ethnic (and class) categories" (Deliovisky & Kitossa, 2013, p. 165). My children sorted people in terms of their Blackness, not in relation to their being white. This Othering is characteristic of white discourse in which "white becomes the norm from which other 'races' stand apart and in relation to which they are defined" (Leonardo, 2002, p. 32). In other words, my children learned a limited racial vocabulary at home and at school that served to maintain a race binary of white and not-white and a white supremacist ideology that measures all other identities against whiteness.

The following vignette illustrates one attempt within the home curriculum to deconstruct the Black/white binary through children's literature. On March 3, 2017 when my children were ages six and nine years old, my family of four cuddled up to read *Mixed Me* (Diggs, 2015) before bed. Each child had read the book independently in the car where I had strategically placed it, but this was the first time we had read it as a family.

My daughter: (reads) *Why pick one race?*

Myself: *Why pick one race*. What does that mean?

My son: Color.

Myself: Why pick one color. Do you remember what we talked about, how color is a little different from race?

My son: Yes. Race is when you think you're better than someone.

(My daughter interrupts with a comment about the illustration.)

Myself: Kinda. Race is like the groups people made up so people say there's a white race and a Black race. Race is made up so that some people can have more power. And color is just the color of our skin, of everyone's, the colors of people's skins.

(We read on.)

My daughter: (reads) *They call me Mixed Up Mike, but that name should be fixed. I'm not mixed up, I just happen to be Mixed.* (asks) What does that mean?

Myself: That Mike is two races because his mom is white and his dad is Black. So, people call that Mixed. And he's saying I'm not mixed up, I'm Mixed. I'm two races. I'm Black and white. And that's why race doesn't really work because you can't put all people in, in a group.

This is only one piece of the antiracist home curriculum and does not represent the whole. Instead the work is ongoing and contextualized, inspired by everyday happenings (such as when my son's friend whose father is Black and whose mother is white told him she identifies as Black) and newly found cultural tools (such as newly published children's books by Latinx authors). Like Nishi (2018), a white parent seeking to enact CRP, my husband and I recognize the constant need to "evolve and complicate these [racial] definitions in future conversations" (Nishi, 2018, p. 17).

Learning to Call Ourselves white

While I initially adopted my children's use of the word brown to label Black people in my interactions with them, I never felt comfortable using the word peach to describe our race. In our daily interactions, I consistently labeled myself *white* and my cohort *white people*. I did this to acknowledge "I had been assigned a race by America's pervasive socialization process...[and] give voice to whiteness as the racial unsaid in [my] life" (Thandeka, 2007). As the study progressed, my children increasingly labeled themselves white rather than avoiding racially labeling themselves or using the word *peach* as a quasi-race label, signaling that they understood themselves to be raced. However, simply using a racial label is not adequate antiracist curriculum. My children also needed an accurate definition of what it means to be white. I attempted to supply this definition in a contextualized manner that addressed historicopolitical meanings. The following exchange from April 18, 2018 illustrates this approach.

My Son: How did he even become president?

Myself: Some people agreed with the things he was saying and voted for him.

My Daughter: WHY!?

Myself: I don't know. It's hard to understand. Because a lot of people still believe that white people are better than every body else. And that's kind of what he was saying. Really I think what Trump was saying was like, *We're tired of always saying Black people and Mexican people, and immigrants from other countries deserve good stuff in America. The people who deserve good stuff in America are the white people who already live here.* I mean really that's what he was saying.

My Daughter: Hilary is white.

Myself: Yeah, she is. I'm white.

My Daughter: I'm white.

My Son: I can't believe-

Myself: The thing about it is, though, we have to work for things to be fair for everybody. Even though we're white, we shouldn't try to have everything for ourselves.

When answering my ten-year-old son's incredulous question about how Donald Trump became president, I attempted to provide him and my seven-year-old daughter with a picture of how whiteness works. I described one way white supremacy operated in the election and attempted to explain that "[r]ace forms a basis for the exploitation and hoarding of material, political, and cultural resources" (Haney-López, 2010, p. 1068). What is absent here is acknowledgement that even *good white folks* are complicit with systemic racism. I did not point out the ways in which Hilary Clinton benefits from the systematic exploitation of People of Color. Instead, I identified as white in proximity to Hilary Clinton while separating myself from Donald Trump's whiteness. Again, the antiracist home curriculum is cumulative and life-long; missteps and partial understandings must not lead us to be stationary. Instead they must inform future antiracist curriculum.

Recognizing our children's need to "envision possible ways to be white and antiracist" (Michael & Bartoli, 2016, p. 4), my husband and I consciously paired definitions of whiteness with historic and present day examples of antiracist actions. On Martin Luther King Day 2019, my family watched the 2014 historical drama, *Selma*, about the 1964 march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama that contributed to the signing of the Voting Rights Act. In the movie, white religious leaders joined the march after viewing television footage of Bloody Sunday. I said to my children, "See why it's important for white people to help? They [the police] wouldn't hurt the white people. It is important for us as white people to use the power we have to help." On June 19, 2018 our family participated in an action organized by our white minister and members of the local Poor People's Campaign. Before the action, we participated in civil disobedience training led by a local Black activist. She pointed out whites are typically at less risk than People of Color and thus would be positioned on the perimeter during the planned action to protect People of Color. The following poetic field note describes the political action.

We were asked to make a line:
most impacted people in the front
least impacted people in the back.
We lined up among the able-bodied, cys-hetero, white folks
at the end of the line.

We walked silently two-by two
past the juvenile court,
past the Huron cemetery,
past the Wyandotte casino,

up the courthouse steps.

The leader
a Black Lives Matter
community activist
spoke about the poor
being held without conviction
because they can't afford bail
and the babies being taken from their parents at the border.

She said silence is powerful,
but our voices are also powerful.
And those who are not impacted
must use their voices,
white folks must use their voices
as partners.

A Black minister spoke
said white people need to forge a new identity,
an identity that does not rely
on the labor of others
for success,
an identity in solidarity with People of Color,
not as allies,
but as partners.
The white voice can no longer be silent.
Yes, my husband said,
and I said, yes.

As we left, we sang
We who believe in freedom shall not rest
We who believe in freedom shall not rest until it comes
Sang it over and over past the jail.
My daughter held my hand
as we walked
and when she learned the words,
she sang along.

During the event we were reminded that our being white afforded us greater protection from violence and oppression and that our role was to work *in solidarity with People of Color*. We experienced walking at the end of the line, listening to the counterstories of People of Color, and waiting until last to talk signaling our position of power as well as our “interconnected and interdependent . . . connection to other racial groups” (Michael & Bartoli, 2016, p. 4). This experience was impactful to each member of my family. Afterward, my son said, “I felt like it really meant something. Like I can do things to the world to change it.”

Implications

White children are often socialized in cultural contexts where adults do not talk about race overtly, but messages of fear, pity, and inferiority about People of Color are conveyed through coded language and social norms (Bartoli et al., 2016; Miller, 2015; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). To break this cycle of socialization into whiteness, and help children see themselves as people who can “do things to the world to change it,” we must enact antiracist curriculum in our homes and schools. In this article, I have shared ways in which my own white family sought to understand racial labels and how they affect our understandings of race in the context of a multiracial community

within a hyper-segregated city. While the antiracist curriculum we enacted is contextualized, imperfect, and ongoing, implications for antiracist curriculum building can be made.

In recognition that definitions of racial categories are ever-changing (Alim, 2016; Leonardo, 2013) and discourses used to maintain white supremacy are constantly evolving (DePouw & Matias, 2016), I offer three curricular guidelines rather than pedagogical strategies (DePouw, 2018): ongoing teacher critical racial literacy development, open discussions of race to support emergent curriculum, and the use of culturally authentic race labels.

Ongoing Teacher/Parent Critical Racial Literacy Development

Teaching accurate racial labels and definitions around race can be especially difficult for white parents and teachers who are often behind on their racial literacy development due to the norms of whiteness and thus have much learning to do in order to serve as antiracist mentors for children (Leonardo & Manning, 2015). Those enacting antiracist curriculum must invest in ongoing critical racial literacy development. Critical racial literacy is achieved through deep and ongoing work including “writing and discussing racial memoirs” (Nash et al., 2018, p. 7), having honest conversations about race (Michael, 2015), and “stand[ing] up for social justice when everyone is standing and when no one else is” (Nishi, 2018, p. 21). For white teachers and parents the work is to “simultaneously check and dismantle [our own] whiteness and raise children to combat whiteness in the world and in themselves” (Nishi, 2018, p. 7). Further, “Talking about race is a skill that should be developed outside the classroom, not practiced on students” (Michael, 2015, p. 84), therefore participation in groups that support the critical racial literacy development of teachers and parents is essential to antiracist education.

Open Discussions of Race to Support Emergent Curriculum

Not only must teachers and parents develop their critical racial literacy skills, we must also create spaces where children feel comfortable bringing up race. Antiracist curriculum should be emergent, because “discussing issues of power and privilege . . . should be done in a way that makes the information relevant to children” (Boutte, López-Robertson, & Powers-Costello, 2011, p. 338). In the face of color evasiveness, a home or classroom culture that supports open discussion of race is vital to carrying out an emergent antiracist curriculum.

Throughout the study, I sought to normalize talk about race by bringing up racial topics myself, leaning in to topics my children brought up, pointing out racial dynamics in day-to-day happenings, and sharing my own experiences as a raced person. I labeled myself as white and talked about the power and relative safety that comes with that racial identity. I leaned in to discussions of race my children initiated such as when my daughter began a discussion about the character, Annie’s, race and skin color. I understand exchanges like this to support the deeper antiracist curriculum we engaged in throughout the study and beyond. Along with encouraging talk about racialized topics my children brought up, I also pointed out race in everyday events including the presidential election, further normalizing talk about race.

Using Culturally Authentic Race Labels

To discuss race in a manner that supports deep and accurate understanding, we must utilize and teach children to use culturally authentic language to label race. In their study of read aloud practices in early childhood classrooms, Beneke and Cheatham (2019) point out children’s literature created to celebrate multiculturalism often frames racial diversity in terms of differences in skin color. The authors warn, “While [other color words] may better describe the skin tones of U.S. children than ‘Black,’ ‘Latina,’ or ‘White,’ they mask a history of racial inequity and collective belonging that may be important to children and families” (p. 124). Thus it is important for teachers and parents to learn race labels individuals use to self-identify and use those labels in day-to-day discourse. This requires talk about racial identities with our friends, neighbors, and colleagues, which will only deepen the antiracist curriculum.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates the ways vocabularies of race were learned and utilized during early childhood in one white family according to our geographic and cultural context. Like Smith (1992), I found, “Labels define the [racial] groups and help to determine how both ‘in’ and ‘out’ group members respond to the group” (p. 513). Steeped in our own racialized Midwestern context, we utilized the racial labels Black and white to conflate race with skin color, reinforce the Black/white binary, and, through antiracist home curriculum, come to more honest

definitions of race. My hope is that these stories provide possibilities for antiracist curriculum in early childhood classrooms and white homes.

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