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Constructing racial literacy through critical language awareness: A case study of a beginning literacy teacher



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ABSTRACT

This case study focuses on the relationship between critical language awareness and racial literacy. We explore how one White preservice teacher explored race and racism and engaged her young student, who identified as Black, in a discussion of “whiteness” and “blackness” in a literacy practicum. We focus on three literacy events (a journal entry about white privilege, a literacy lesson with her student, and a debriefing session with her colleagues) to answer our research questions: How does a literacy teacher bring a developing awareness of racism and white privilege to her literacy practices while learning to teach in a practicum? What tools and contexts support her work to analyze, critique and reconstruct her understandings? How might we understand the affordances and constraints of literacy practices? The findings of the study suggest the ways in which CLA works as a tool in breaking a silence about race, providing a diverse set of tools to do so. The case study we present has implications for researchers studying racial literacy through critical approaches to discourse as well as teacher educators and teachers developing practices of racial literacy.

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Introduction

In August, 2014, a police officer shot and killed Michael Brown, an unarmed Black seventeen year-old in Ferguson, Missouri, a U.S. city long struggling with racism in the schools and the law enforcement. The country and world paid attention as a grand jury failed to indict the White police officer. Teachers throughout the country asked themselves how one might use this as a teachable moment to help students to make sense of the events as they unfolded and open a conversation about the experiences of those who, like Brown, experience segregated and under-resourced schools, police brutality, and racial profiling in their communities (e.g., Bell, 2014). Simultaneously, administrators in neighboring cities called for a silence around the events (e.g., Strauss, 2014), raising awareness of the powerful silence and fear surrounding race and racism in these same schools and communities. It was never as clear that literacy teachers, who broker language and literacy practices, carry a particular responsibility toward the critical analysis of race, language and power (e.g., Jones & Enriquez, 2009; Turner, 2007). We consider the importance of the role of teachers in breaking a silence about race when preparing preservice teachers in our courses and practicum experiences. During a yearlong study, we worked alongside our teacher education students to analyze, critique and reconstruct language and literacy practices. Part of this teaching and learning included an examination of race, racism and anti-racism using racial literacy practices (Rogers & Mosley, 2006, 2008).

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In this paper, we share a case study situated in a literacy practicum in an elementary school that served African American students and the associated literacy course focused on teaching literacy in the elementary school. Lisa, a White teacher, created opportunities throughout the year to engage with matters of language, power and race. When the course theme turned to anti-racism and literacy education, Lisa sought to integrate theory and practice and transform her awareness of white privilege into action for racial justice. To accomplish this, she examined her own racialized thinking and practice and invited her African American student, Helena, and colleagues to do the same.

Analytically, we were interested in how Lisa drew on the tools of critical language awareness to critically analyze language and literacy practices and thus, worked to propel forward her racial understandings. We identified three thematically-connected events — a journal entry about white privilege, a literacy lesson with her student, and a debriefing session with her colleagues — that occurred over a relatively short period of time (a week) to examine her racialized understandings. We turned to critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1993; Halliday, 1978; Janks, 2005) to ask: How does a literacy teacher bring a developing awareness of racism and white privilege to her literacy practices while learning to teach in a practicum? What tools and contexts support her work to analyze, critique and reconstruct her understandings? How might we understand the affordances and constraints of literacy practices?

We demonstrate how Lisa engaged in analysis and critique to deconstruct the racialized meanings of texts (her own and others) and reconstructed new racialized meanings, by herself, with her student and with her colleagues. We make the case that because race, as a discursive and material process, is constructed across time, contexts and people, that racial literacy is not possible without critical approaches to language and literacy.

Theoretical orientations

Racial literacy

Racial literacy emerges from scholarship in critical race theory and whiteness studies (Rogers & Mosley, 2006, 2008; Guinier, 2004; Twine, 2004). Guinier (2004) defines racial literacy as an interactive *process* in which the framework of race is used as a lens to explore social and legal practices, explicating the relationship between race and power, and examining mitigating variables such as gender, class, and geography. Racial literacy is closely aligned with critical race theories of how inequities — social hierarchies and economic outcomes — are produced and reproduced through race (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solorzano, 1997; Tate, 1996). As such, racial literacy is a practice concerned with how language and power provide access to resources while others are excluded from gaining social, political, and economic advantage. Twine's (2004) work on racial literacy within whiteness studies — her critical analysis of how multiracial families support their children's racial literacy and identity development — extends this framework to add how racial literacy operates at the individual level.

Whereas critical race theory and whiteness studies examine racism *within* legal and individual discourses (e.g., Giroux, 1997; Harris, 1993), racial literacy examines race and racism *as* discourse (Johnson, 2009). Racial literacy begins from the understanding that race and discourse operate constitutively; that is, our discourse practices construct and reflect race. Race, as a social construct, is encoded in the texts of contemporary society (spoken, written, digital). People discursively construct the racial worlds they inhabit, bringing them to life through communicative practices (Bell, 1992; Morrison, 1993). There are material aspects of race and racism that result in economic, political and educational inequities (e.g. Guinier and Torres, 2002; Shapiro, 2004). People construct race when they classify, categorize and label. These categories and meanings of difference shift over time, resulting in systemic privilege and oppression. Racial literacy attempts to analyze the relationships between texts, communicative events and social practices that constitute race, racism and anti-racism.

In educational research, various studies have highlighted the rhetorical tools associated with racial literacy. McIntosh's (1988) well-known study defined "white talk" as the kinds of discursive moves that white people use to avoid discussions about race and racism. We expanded the notion of "white talk" to include the kinds of discourses and stances that constitutes anti-racism in our own work, analyzing how pre-service teachers engaged in conversations about race and the discursive tools they called on — both traditional forms of "white talk" such as avoidance, resistance and blaming but also what we refer to as "expanded forms of white talk" that include addressing race and lingering in the ambiguity and paradoxes of race (Rogers & Mosley, 2008, 2011). Our work has also explored consciousness about race, language and literacy and associated identities and stances of anti-racism. Johnson (2009) and Gilyard (2008) have also contributed to what we understand as the interactive processes that we refer to as racial literacy through their work in college composition studies. Racial literacy is grounded in critical approaches to language and literacy, to which we now turn.

Critical approaches to the study of discourse practices

Critical discourse studies is an umbrella term that references interrelated frameworks such as critical discourse analysis (CDA), critical literacy and critical language awareness (CLA) (see Pennycook, 2010 for an overview of approaches). CDA is an approach to research and CLA might be viewed as the pedagogical application. However, the lines between research and teaching are often blurred as teachers are inquiring into their own practices. Critical approaches to the study of discourse practices share assumptions about the constitutive force of discourses to both create and reflect social life. Similarly, these approaches assume that discourse practices are always ideological and part of the struggle for dominance and power. The

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