

“You Are a Racist”: An Early Childhood Educator’s Racialized Awakening

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This article details my racialized awakenings as a White kindergarten teacher after being called a racist by a parent of one of my students. I chronicle critical reflections of myself and my school in terms of latent institutional racism and actions. I share the actions that I have begun in my efforts to counter racism and move toward teaching for social justice. Changes in my teaching included interrupting deficit perspectives, talking explicitly about race, critiquing literature that I use in my classroom, and exploring ways to provide ongoing counternarratives that honor culturally and linguistically diverse students. I conclude with implications for other Early Childhood teachers who are teaching across racial boundaries. While I do not position my findings as the solution to countering institutional racism in the classroom, I hope that my journey can be enlightening to educators facing similar conflicts.

Keywords: racism, oppression, social justice, early childhood education, counternarratives

The Exposition: My Story

As teachers, we revel in the power of stories. Stories entertain, educate, and reveal. Stories can be charged with emotion. Stories take us places: to great lands of imagination, to carefree summer days of childhood, to fascinating lives of others. Sometimes, however, stories take us to unexpected places that shape our identities in unexpected ways. This is my story.

Luwisch (2001) explains that telling our personal stories is a “powerful means of becoming aware of the taken-for-granted arrangements and constraints of one’s own culture” (134). I am a White, middle-class kindergarten teacher in an urban, Title I school in the Southeast. During my third year teaching, I experienced a painful racialized awakening. It was a story I did not want to tell. Now, two years later, I know it is a story I *must* tell. Stories like mine wither under the pressures to conceal failure, to accept the status quo, and to minimize the seriousness of a society grounded in oppression. Because my racial demographic reflects most of the teachers in a field where most of the children are culturally and linguistically diverse, it is important to hear firsthand accounts that make visible the dynamics involved in teaching cross-racially. Such stories are not intended to further marginalize the narratives of teachers of color, but rather to complement them because

both sets of stories can coexist and shed insights on the complex and multifaceted processes involved in teaching culturally and linguistically diverse students.

Luwisch further emphasizes that “telling our stories is indeed a matter of survival: only by telling and listening, storying and restorying, can we begin the process of constructing a common world” (145). I tell my story to share my journey as I start to create a “common” world of anti-racism in my kindergarten classroom. I am not suggesting that my story offers all the answers or serves as a panacea to the complex and varied issues faced in racially integrated school contexts. However, I suspect that I am not the only teacher with this story to tell. It is a painful story of my awakening to the reality of a racist framework that I did not create but that I inadvertently supported every day of my life. As a result of my firsthand experience, I began searching for opportunities for actions that will begin constructing my classroom as a common world in which racism is no longer a blatantly invisible dynamic. If well-intentioned teachers like myself are going to interrupt racism rather than reify it, we first have to be able to recognize and name it—particularly when racism is covert or hidden.

I will tell my story in four parts: (1) the incident—being called a racist; (2) the climax—naming and reflecting on racism; (3) the falling action—taking action by unzipping cultures, interrupting deficit perspectives, talking explicitly about race, analyzing children’s literature, and exploring counternarratives; and (4) the resolution—resolving to change systems of oppression in school cultures through teachers’ critical self-reflections and racialized awakenings.

The Incident: “You Are a Racist”

By October, my kindergarten class—composed of twenty students of color (eighteen African American; two multiracial) and five White students—had started settling into the way of kindergarten life. However, I was worried about Ariya, an African American child in my class.¹ Learning to navigate the social realm of friendship constitutes a large part of the kindergarten experience. I saw Ariya as a caring, brilliant kindergartener: She would frequently beam as she handed me “I love you” notes or short stories she had written by herself, or a yogurt snack from her own fridge one day as a gift for me. With her classmates, however, conflicts prevailed. When Ariya’s requests for toys or specific roles in the home living center were not honored, she often responded by yanking objects away from other children, yelling “I don’t have to do what you say!” in their faces, and sulking in a corner while refusing to compromise. I felt like I was constantly intervening to protect classmates from Ariya’s emotional outbursts. I wrote notes to her mother almost daily explaining specific behaviors that were causing problems in class, usually relating to hitting or shoving friends, fighting over toys, and verbally intimidating her peers. Ariya’s behavior escalated to what I considered bullying her peers to get what she wanted. For example, if she wanted a certain classroom object that another child was using, she would stand so close to the other child that their noses practically touched, often intimidating the other child until the toy was surrendered. Our school had recently adopted a no-tolerance policy for bullying, so I knew that I was expected to make efforts to stop the behavior in accordance with this policy. I talked with Ariya and her peers about peaceful conflict resolution, such as talking through compromises or timed turn-taking. I talked with our principal to decide on the best plan of action to stop the behavior. The struggles continued. I needed her mother’s help and support, so I invited her in for a conference to work together to create a positive behavior plan for Ariya.

In the conference, however, my hopes for help were dashed. Ariya’s mother accepted no accountability for Ariya’s bullying behavior; instead, she insisted that I was the problem. She refused to sign the behavior sheet for the remainder of the year and stated that she did not believe her child was bad. She also accused me of giving sad faces on the behavior sheet only to Black children, and I quickly countered this accusation because there was one White boy in my class receiving far more notes home than Ariya. She then curtly announced, “The reason why you don’t like my child is because *you are a racist*.” These words echoed in my head as the room started spinning. I was vaguely aware of the vice-principal, who was dressed in a Superwoman costume following our school’s anti-bullying rally, ending the conference abruptly. I turned to Ariya and told her to have a good afternoon and that I would see her in the morning. I only hoped she would not see the tears

welling in my eyes, flooding their banks as soon she and her mother left.

Devastation mounted in my heart. Me? Racist? How could this be? I thought I had lived my whole life trying to accept others, to respect diversity, to recognize the unique strengths of individuals, to celebrate differences. In my mind, racism was an intentional cruelty toward someone with a different skin color than my own. How could someone accuse me of such a horrible offense, just because I was White, and Ariya was Black? My self-questioning continued and unsettled me greatly. Why *was* I always calling on Ariya? Was she truly the only offender in my class? Who really started the squabbles in the home living center? Was Ariya struggling to cooperate with all of her peers, or was it just those of races different than her own? Were those peers also struggling to cooperate with her? Had Ariya’s misbehavior become a self-fulfilling prophecy because I was always looking to protect the other children from what I perceived as her emotional outbursts? Did my actions actually worsen the situation for Ariya, when I thought I had been trying to help? Was Ariya’s direct way of defending herself culturally influenced, making this situation a matter of cultural misinterpretation after all? How did my lack of preparation to think about behavior in cultural ways and lack of strategies for addressing disciplinary problems in thoughtful ways contribute to the situation? Why did I perceive this Black child to be the problem? Did I look past the misbehaviors of White children, attributing them to having a bad day? What would I find if I more carefully documented and studied the patterns of whom I was disciplining and why? How and why could one child seem to be the source of the majority of our classroom’s behavior challenges? What should I—and my school—have done differently to make sure *Ariya* was being treated fairly and not being profiled as the discipline problem? What caused this profiling and what did I overlook through profiling?

As I reflected deeply on these seemingly unending questions, they catalyzed my learning process. For the first few days following the incident, I found myself in a form of crisis. Consistent with the findings of Kumashiro (2008), I felt guilty for the times in my life that I had stereotyped others—*Black boys are behavior problems, Black families aren’t as involved in their children’s educations*—but had been unaware of this offense because of the normalization of such stereotypes. I then moved from guilt into fear and anger: fear of offending this mother again—a fear that persists for me, even though Ariya is no longer my student—and anger that this mother would consider me a racist. Ironically, Jensen (2005) identifies guilt, fear, and anger as emotions of White supremacy. Jensen explains that guilt allows Whites to avoid accountability and avoid taking action. Fear enters because Whites do not want to lose the benefits we have in our currently racially stratified

society. Anger propels Whites into action or inaction, either by attempting to change or maintain the status quo.

Coworkers tried to assuage my guilt. They assured me that I was not racist, even going so far as to call this Black mother racist toward *me*. I knew deep inside, however, that the mother's words released the sting they did because they contained shadows of the truth. While I may not have committed intentional individual racism, I was unconsciously involved in a system of institutional racism. As Boutte, Lopez-Robertson, and Powers-Costello (2011) noted, "racialized outcomes do not require racist actors" (335). Being called a racist was my "waking up" moment in Harro's (2000a) cycle of liberation.² My anger about being called a racist turned into anger toward a society that still harbors racism. I faced two choices: to dismiss the parent's comment as her problem and to continue on my routine teaching path, or to examine myself to see if there was any truth in the parent's comment, and, if there was, to decide on a course of action.

I came to realize that as microcosms of society, schools cannot be free of institutional racism (Stevens and Charles 2005). While silence about my discovery was the more comfortable option, it would contribute to the problem by serving as consent (Boutte et al. 2011; Harro 2000b). Silence, after all, has long been a tool of the oppressor (Freire 1970/1999). I was White; most of my students were Black. I had never been forced to name my Whiteness before. My racialized awakening led me to question myself and the structure of school.

The Climax: Naming and Reflecting on Racism

Being called a racist by a Black parent prompted my subsequent and ongoing racialized awakening. I had to ask myself how and why the parent felt that I was a racist. What would I have thought if I had been in her place? What were my actions that led her to draw this conclusion? Most importantly, I had to wonder—what did Ariya think? I knew that my intent was to fairly and effectively teach all children and to create a welcoming environment for their parents. Now, I had to reflect: Was I actually doing what I *thought* I was doing? I reflected and read extensively as a doctoral student wishing to explore how issues of race haunt classrooms to this day (see Table 1). As a result, I have discovered that when teachers discriminate, it is not usually due to malice or blatant racism, classism, or sexism. Society embodies biases that we have been socialized to accept—such as Whites being more capable than Blacks—so members of that society (including teachers) do not question these biases (Garcia 1984). Therefore, racism exists because it has been woven into the status quo of society; however, it will be "impossible to address and counter racism if we do not admit that it exists" (Boutte et al. 2011, 335).

Unfortunately, admitting that racism exists seems to be taboo in public schools. Jacqueline Jordan Irvine refers to race as another "four-letter word" in schools that teachers avoid discussing (as cited in Darden 2009, 53).

Just as there are accepted representations for taboo four-letter words, teachers still talk about race without using the word itself. I realized that I had also been an active participant in many racial conversations at my school, even though I felt uncomfortable at times. Below are examples of some of the comments. I also reflect on what I have learned about the racialized undertones of the statements. My goal is to demonstrate how everyday conversations and actions of individuals like myself and other well-intentioned teachers can unknowingly contribute to and maintain racism and other types of oppression in schools.

- "*Have you ever seen skin so black?*" A fellow teacher shared this observation of one of my students with me during my first year teaching. I was taken aback—why on earth did the darkness of my student's skin matter? The unstated suggestion is that darker skin was less desirable. While this comment was shared with me, I also realize that many children of color continuously receive the messages in society and school that dark is bad (Tenorio 2008). Even though my preservice teacher preparation addressed diversity to some extent, it did not equip me with the tools to process or respond to such comments.
- "*I wish I could take him home with me!*" While seemingly good-natured, the context in which this comment was made conveyed condescension. The implication was that the student's family was inferior and unable to meet his or her needs. The comment positions the teacher as a "white knight" who can "save" or "help" a child of color—a theme that also explains why many White teachers feel drawn to teach in inner-city schools (McIntyre 1997). I have come to realize that such statements, though intentionally benevolent, are indeed patronizing and do not acknowledge the existing familial strengths of culturally diverse children.
- "*They can't _____.*" This common symptom of a deficit-based perspective formed a recurrent theme of conversations in our teachers' lounge. My reading (Delpit 2012; Gay 2010; Howard 2010; Kunjufu 2006) has revealed to me a long history, as well as contemporary examples, of deficit models that assume something is wrong with children from "non-mainstream" homes—e.g., Ruby Payne's (1995) work on children of poverty (Kunjufu 2006).
- "*We don't see the color of their skin. We love them all the same.*" These comments are problematic for two reasons. The first statement speaks to teachers' tendency to seek refuge in colorblindness, or the refusal to acknowledge different skin colors in an attempt to treat all children the same. Affirmation and sameness, two traits

Table 1. Key Readings that Assisted My Racialized Awakening

<i>Key Readings</i>	<i>Insights</i>
Harro (2000a)—The Cycle of Socialization	I became aware of racism and other types of oppression on an institutional level and how they become unconsciously embedded within our daily practices and experiences.
Harro (2000b)—The Cycle of Liberation	I realized that we did not have to remain passive captives of socialization as we challenged the status quo within ourselves, then with others, and then within the system.
The Council on Interracial Books for Children (2008)	Even though we think of children's literature as innocuous, it can be a vessel for perpetuating stereotypes and biases. I now am equipped to critique children's literature with my students.
Boutte et al. (2011)—Moving Beyond Colorblindness in Early Childhood Classroom	Colorblindness is not a strength; in fact, it is detrimental to our children of color. This article provides practical suggestions of how teachers can move beyond colorblindness to have important discussions about race with young children.
Boykin (1994)—Afrocultural Expression and Its Implications for Schooling	Our schools have deeply-woven "cultural fabric" that controls our daily actions as teachers and students without our awareness. Boykin also summarizes his earlier work on the nine dimensions of Afrocultural expression, which can be misconstrued as misbehavior for African American students.
Freire (1970/1999)—Pedagogy of the Oppressed	The four characteristics of antidiological action—conquest, divide and rule, manipulation, and cultural invasion—maintain oppressive cycles by stripping power and discouraging questioning. These characteristics can be observed within the context of schooling. We need to move toward dialogical action—cooperation, unity for liberation, organization, and cultural synthesis—if we wish to interrupt oppressive power structures.
Boutte (2007)—Teaching Students Who Speak African American Language	Though widely stigmatized, African American Language (AAL) is a legitimate, rule-based dialect, and we should not punish AAL-speaking students for their linguistic diversity. Instead, we should explicitly teach code-switching, contrastive analysis, and code-meshing.
Tenorio (2008)—Raising Issues of Race with Young Children	This article shares creative, practical activities for early childhood educators to use with their students to explore issues of race. Following Tenorio's inspiration, I brainstormed an additional activity: going on a color hunt. It challenges students to find an item in the room that is red. Then, compare the items—are they all the same shade of red? Repeat with other colors until children realize that colors have variations. This activity would provide a concrete introduction to races and skin colors.
Jensen (2005)—The Heart of Whiteness	Jensen unpacks White privilege, White supremacy, and institutional racism. He also differentiates between non-racism and anti-racism. If we wish to interrupt oppressive power structures, non-racism is not enough.
Polluck (2008)—Everyday Antiracism	Race is a social construct. It has been used throughout history—mostly from the 1600s onward—to justify slavery and colonial conquest. Race has no biological foundations.
Paley (1979/2000, 1997)—White Teacher and The Girl with the Brown Crayon	A fellow kindergarten teacher, Paley traces her journey through teaching in newly-integrated schools. She details her shortcomings—including her recognition of her own colorblindness—and struggles to enact her beliefs amidst colleagues with different beliefs. These themes are still prevalent struggles for teachers today.

that colorblindness promotes, contradict antioppressive education (Kumashiro 2008). Colorblindness is far from a refuge: it perpetuates racism, thus causing much more harm than good (Boutte et al. 2011; Gay 2010; Howard 2010; Miller 2010; McIntyre 1997; Paley 1979/2000). The second sentence of this quotation also embodies the naïve and simplistic ideal of loving each other but does not point to actions that interpret what this means in terms of teaching behaviors (Boutte 2008). McIntyre

(1997) attacks the use of caring as a solution to racism in schools because "it frees them, as white teachers, to 'love' *all* students, while at the same time, relinquishing them from taking responsibility for confronting the conditions that keep people in poverty and ignorance" (131).

As teachers, we did not consider any of the aforementioned comments to be racist or classist at the time. The

climax of my story not only reflects the manifestation of racism living and thriving in my own school but also points to the realization of the existence of white privilege within me and in the school.

White Privilege

Whiteness is the “invisible norm” (Derman-Sparks and Ramsey 2006, 35). In my formative years growing up in the South, no one explicitly discussed race. No one told me that I was White and that I enjoyed endless social privileges that people of color did not receive. I now realize I am “insulated in, and by, my own skin color” (McIntyre 1997, 1). McIntosh (1990) refers to the invisible knapsack of privileges that Whites carry, even though we did no independent work to earn these privileges—we just had to be White. I have benefited my whole life from being White, and now I teach at a school where our population is mostly non-White, yet we still hold whiteness as the norm.

“White is power” (Jensen 2005, 2), and this power comes from the oppression of others (Gay 2010; Hilliard 2009; Howard 2010;). McIntyre (1997) explains that Whites use “white talk” to insulate themselves from examining their individual and collective roles in the continuation of racism. If we revisit some of the quotes from teachers at my school, we can find proof of this usage of “white talk” to establish students of color as “The Other” (with dark skin), inferior (with incapable families), incapable (with deficit models), and invisible (with superficial colorblindness). These coping mechanisms allow the blame for failure to fall upon the victims without negatively impacting the Whites involved in institutional racism.

After my initial racialized awakening, my eyes were opened to see vivid examples of racism and White privilege in the elementary school where I teach—a place that I had always assumed to be free of such deleterious influences. As I continued my doctoral studies, I encountered Strobel’s (1997) framework of decolonization. The three stages of her framework are naming, reflection, and action. Naming the oppression and understanding its impact on my identity was an important part in my ongoing racialized awakening that enabled me to reflect critically and look deeply at myself and society. Along the way, I realized I had spent much of my time—nearly two years ago—naming and reflecting, which Strobel cautions can be self-consuming and nonproductive without moving on to take reflective action. Therefore, I had to determine what action I would take. I should note that the three stages are not necessarily linear: there is much reflection and naming even during the action stage, as will be evident in the subsequent section.

Falling Action: Taking Action

Taking action is the ultimate piece of antioppressive education. It is not an easy task. After nearly two years of

naming and reflecting, I began to feel competent enough to take action. As Kumashiro (2008) explains,

It is only when educators acknowledge the impossibilities, unknowabilities, and uncontrollabilities of teaching, and work within stuck places, that change is possible. Thus, teaching and learning against oppression cannot revolve around the desires for affirmation and sameness; students and teachers alike must be open to entering crisis and following the discomforting desire for difference (123).

While “stuck places” are uncomfortable, they are birthplaces for change. In following my “discomfort,” I have discovered the need to unzip individual and school cultures; to interrupt deficit-based perspectives; and, most importantly, to talk about race with my students.

Unzipping Cultures

For me, the biggest challenge of antioppressive teaching has been what I call “unzipping” cultures. Just as McIntosh (1990) recognizes the invisible knapsack of White privilege, I believe we all carry “cultural knapsacks,” some more visible than others. I bring my own cultural experiences with me in my knapsack, as do my students and coworkers. Our home cultures are largely invisible to us because we have lived them our whole lives. We wear these “cloaks of invisibility” comfortably—until we bump into another person wearing a different cultural cloak, thus dislodging invisibility for us both. As teachers, we must use schools as places where students “bump” into each other to unveil our differences, thus unzipping our cultural backpacks to reveal their contents.

As teachers, we have the power to instill our beliefs in others, intentionally or unintentionally. Therefore, it is important that we know who we are as individuals and as educators, including which biases and stereotypes we hold (Garcia 1984). For White educators, McIntyre (1997) asserts the importance of making their Whiteness public. This task is difficult for Whites because as members of the dominant group, our whiteness is not a typical topic of discussion (Howard 2010). Without self-reflection, however, Whites avoid “investigating the meaning of whiteness [which] prohibits a critical examination of the individual, institutional, and cultural forms of racism” (14). We must remove the invisible cloak of Whiteness to “emerge from the world, objectify it, and in so doing . . . understand it and transform it with [our] labor” (Freire 1970/1999, 125).

Removing this cloak of invisibility through critical self-reflection is a difficult process, though it is a vital first step to action (Boykin 1994; Freire 1970/1999; Gay 2010; Jensen 2005). Boutte et al. (2011) suggest that teachers begin this journey by reflecting on childhood messages that they received from their own parents or

guardians and how they compare to messages that teachers now send to their present students and children. Because we are socialized into many of our beliefs (Harro 2000b), we must analyze the beliefs we hold as well as their origins to deconstruct stereotypes and biases. We must use critical self-reflection to expose our own vulnerabilities; after all, only then can we “allow our world to turn upside down in order to allow the realities of others to edge themselves into our consciousness” (Delpit 1998, 47).

Teachers are reluctant to discuss race, color, and racism not because we do not want to but because we do not know how to (Boutte et al. 2011). Ignoring the “isms”—including, but not limited to, classism, sexism, and racism—is easier, but it will not make them go away (Garcia 1984). Instead, we must take responsibility to learn about our own and others’ cultures. My student’s mother may have experienced a school culture that produced negative memories of discrimination against herself as a student (Rowley, Lumas, and Banerjee 2010). Being aware of this life experience might have made me more sensitive as I welcomed this mother and her child into my classroom, but I also must recognize the strong, legitimate emotions tied to such experiences. Next year, I plan to informally interview parents during our fall conference to ask questions about their experiences with schooling, their perception of teachers, and ways I can help make kindergarten a comfortable experience not only for their child but also for them. I also plan to position myself as a learner and encourage parents to pose questions to me beyond the “scripted” ones that I have planned.

The culture of schools also has to be unzipped. Next year, I will collect artifacts of home–school communications and analyze them for the hidden story of the inequities inherent in school practices and policies, which comprise schools’ “cultural fabric” (Boykin 1994). Schools need antioppressive reform on a deeper level, one that starts with questioning itself (Ladson-Billings 2009). As teachers, we can question the status quo of schools—procedures that seem absolutely “normal” and “routine.” For instance, we can ask: “Who is affirmed and who is left out? Do the hiring patterns reflect the student demographics—why or why not? Who holds the power?” After my racialized awakening, these questions—and some shocking answers—surfaced. Even though 75 percent of our student population is Black, we have two teachers of color on our staff, which Paley (1979/2000) calls a “white integrated school” (10). Black children were frequently stigmatized in deficit-based conversations. Single-parent households were dismissed as weak and inferior. I wonder if parents—such as Ariya’s mother—can perceive this culture too. As Delpit (1998) noted, “(t)hose with power are frequently least aware of—or least willing to acknowledge—its existence. Those with less power are often most aware of its existence” (26).

Interrupting Deficit Perspectives

One tangible step toward antioppressive education that I am learning to embrace is interrupting deficit-based perspectives. Now, whenever I find myself thinking about what my students cannot do, I stop and reframe the question: What *can* they do? In grade-level meetings, I developed a reputation as “Miss Optimistic” for interrupting deficit-based dialogue. For instance, when a teacher bemoaned the fact that a five-year-old student could not write sentences in December, I reminded her that the page filled with letters and letter-like symbols demonstrated the child’s understanding of print as having meaning. Optimistic interruptions are a strategy that novice teachers like myself may find easily accessible as they begin antioppression work in their classrooms, but they cannot be the only strategy used for permanent, long-lasting structural change.

Another frequent complaint of teachers in my school centers on the behavior of the Black students, especially boys. Without an awareness of the body of knowledge of the dimensions of African culture (e.g., spirituality, harmony, movement, verve, affect, expressive individualism, communalism, orality, and social time perspective; Boykin 1994), the behavior of many Black males was viewed through the one-dimensional lens of mainstream culture. Yet, when we reconsider “behavior problems”—including excessive talking, movement, attitude, or questioning authority—through this frame of reference, we often clearly see a cultural mismatch between “Afrocultural expressions” and the cultural fabric of school (Boykin 1994). While not essentializing Black culture, teachers may find it useful to consider whether these behaviors are manifestations of culture instead of behavioral problems—which requires that we first educate ourselves on cultures different from our own.

Talking with Children about Race

While many teachers find racial conversations to be difficult and uncomfortable, “*not* teaching about racism—an oppressive process and system that hurts people of color and Whites—threatens the full humanity of all and violates the professional code of ethics” of doing no harm to children (Boutte et al. 2011, 341). In addition, “what parents and educators do not say or do is as powerful as what we do” (Boutte 2008, 167). One action that I decided to take to interrupt the deafening silence of racism in schools is to use children’s literature that lend themselves to conversations about race. (For a list of such literature, see Boutte et al. 2011.)

I have also come to see the importance of examining books and other classroom resources for inherent biases toward children of color (The Council on Interracial Books for Children 2008). Retrospectively, I can see how

the books that I selected in my kindergarten classroom—though I attempted to include stories with diverse characters and themes—rendered African American and other children of color largely invisible. Teachers can analyze books *with* their students to teach them to be questioning, critical consumers of information, important components of culturally responsive teaching (Ladson-Billings 2009). Teachers also can invite parents to preview books with multicultural themes (Boutte et al. 2011). I now envision inviting my students' families to form small literature circles to read and discuss multiculturally themed books that I would send home with students to facilitate further dialogue. Likewise, I will solicit favorite books, songs, and other literacies from parents to share with my class. This is an important step because I now recognize that families are “experts in their own lives” (Delpit 1998, 47). Like Ariya's mother, they might even be experts in detecting racism.

Counternarratives

Listening to students in our classes is a starting point for interrupting the silence of the voices of culturally and linguistically diverse students. Counternarratives tell the stories that the mainstream narratives tend to silence. This past year, some of my kindergarteners believed that being Black comes from drinking too much chocolate milk, and they later started debating if the Black Santa was the real Santa. Because I lacked the knowledge base, strategies, and available resources at the time (Boutte et al. 2011), I simply skirted the issue. Now, however, I recognize that I missed important learning opportunities. We could have completed an experiment to see if chocolate milk consumption changed our skin color over a month, or polled various people of all races what kind of milk they like to drink to realize that milk consumption does not actually correlate with skin color. As for Black Santa, we could have searched for images of Santa and tallied the number of White and Black Santas we discovered. Next, we could have researched “Santa cohorts” around the world to see if different cultures have holiday personas of different races—or if they have holiday personas at all. Chocolate milk and Black Santa would have been my doorways into a relevant and meaningful discussion of race. Hopefully, these two topics will revisit our kindergarten classroom next year: This time, I will be ready.

The Resolution: Resolving to Change

Kumashiro (2008) observes, “When teaching and learning against oppression occurs, crises cannot be avoided, should not be avoided, and must be worked through” (117). I have encountered one crisis already, and I know

I will face more as I work toward developing an antioppressive pedagogy in my kindergarten classroom. For some, the incident of being called a racist may appear to be minor. However, against the backdrop of a society in which even talking about race or “seeing color” is taboo, such an encounter was earth-shattering to me. Some may question whether the parent was warranted in her action or even if she was overstating the issue. Another African American parent—ironically related to Ariya's mother—came to me to apologize for the way Ariya's mother had treated me all year and to say that she appreciated all the work I had done with her son. While her words moved me greatly, I still knew that on some level, the accusation of Ariya's mother held some merit. Perhaps one day in the near future, I can engage in dialogue with Ariya's mother to exchange ideas and to learn from one another. I have drafted letters and planned conversations in my mind with Ariya's mother, but I need to find the courage to move from reflection into action. My racialized awakening journey will continue in collaboration with people of color who often live with the reality of racism every day.

While most linear stories end with the resolution—the solving of the problems, of the crises—I know this ending is only the beginning of my struggle as a White teacher amongst a mostly White teaching faculty at a mostly Black school. I read much literature about preparing preservice teachers to talk about race in their future classrooms (i.e., McIntyre, 1997; Stevens and Charles 2005), but there seems to be another deafening silence when we look into similar opportunity for in-service teachers. One professional development session will not dismantle the invisible cloak of racism in our schools. Nor can a small group of antioppression educators carry out a revolution on behalf of all the other teachers (Friere 1970/1999). One of my current struggles is determining how I can engage other teachers in my school to begin deliberating these issues, how to “measure my colleagues' songs without silencing my own” (Paley 1997, 45).

I tell my story because I know not many teachers are willing to tell a story of such pain and critical self-reflection. Even though I am early in my career, this episode was a defining moment in my life as an early childhood educator and as a doctoral student. It haunts my actions on a daily basis, both in and out of the classroom. I will always be associated with Whiteness, but I no longer have to let it insulate me. It is not my intent to essentialize White teachers or Black children and their families, and I do not suggest that “White” and “racist” are synonymous. But I do believe that it is important for White teachers to find positive White role models who face issues of racism squarely and move beyond guilt and anger to claim a positive White identity. I will use my racialized awakening as a focal point in my journey toward taking action to transform my classroom into a place of liberation, “*the practice of love*” (Harro 2000a, 469).

Being called a racist seems to have been a blessing in disguise, after all.

Notes

1. Pseudonym.
2. Harro's cycle of liberation follows the sequence of waking up, getting ready, and reaching out in the intrapersonal stage; building community and coalescing in the interpersonal stage; and creating change and maintaining it in the systemic stage.

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