Using Drama Pedagogy to Develop Critical Racial Literacy in an Early Childhood Classroom

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Abstract

Inspired by social justice education research, this article explores the use of drama pedagogy to teach concepts of racism and history through a multicultural lens. The researcher specifically sought to learn how drama pedagogy shapes and influences children’s understanding of race and racism in the early childhood classroom and what meanings children construct, communicate, and represent while participating in dramatic pedagogy. The piece results in several findings related to the use of constructivist methods to promote critical conversation and recommendations for other early educators that seek to engage in critical teaching practices within their early education classroom.
Years ago, I sat at a table with three of my colleagues and began discussing what we would potentially teach during “Black History Month”. Ms. Johnson, a veteran 1st grade teacher of 22 years, informed us that she had many color, cut, and paste worksheets that we could gladly use to teach this content. Ms. Johnson insisted that we should use these worksheets because they have always “worked” well in the past. Ms. Williams eagerly replied, “Thanks so much!” “This will make things so much easier for me!” As a novice teacher, Ms. Williams seemed to appreciate having access to a preformatted and commercial unit on Black History. After hearing these two suggestions, I suggested that we develop an original curriculum unit that dealt with some of the less than romantic aspects of Black History. From my vantage point, teaching young children about Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks without discussing slavery and the Klu Klux Klan would be giving them an inaccurate view of history.

Ms. Hunt emphatically objected, “I don’t think we should be teaching young children about racism! They are too young for all of that garbage! Just let kids be kids.”

While trying to keep from getting overly emotional and argumentative, I politely explained to Ms. Hunt and the rest of my colleagues that the danger of teaching colorblind and apolitical versions of history is that we create adult citizens who (knowingly and unknowingly) contribute to racial injustice in society. I went on to further explain that there is no such thing as “being neutral” while teaching. Whether we realize it or not, what we do as teachers today will contribute to the nature of citizens we have in society tomorrow. I concluded my reasoning by explaining that the first step to teaching for social justice is to identify social injustice. The three women looked at me with stares of confusion mixed with anger. An awkward silence ensued for the next two or three minutes.
To eliminate this tension, Ms. Johnson offered a tentative solution to this issue. “Here’s what we will do,” Ms. Johnson insisted. “Those of us who want to use the worksheets can use the worksheets and those of us who want to develop something original can develop something original.”

We all agreed that this was the seemingly best comprise as the planning meeting adjourned. As I reflected on the events from this meeting in the days that followed, I felt more and more compelled to teach my students about race and racism in critical and non-superficial ways. From my perspective, not teaching young children about racial injustice creates more damage than teaching them about these issues in a forthright manner.

As I began the planning process for this unit, two important questions emerged and resonated in my mind. First, what pedagogical approaches would assist me in teaching young children about race and racism in ways that are both critical and developmentally appropriate? Second, what meanings would my students construct as they learned about race and racism in a critical manner?

**Racially Diverse Classrooms**

Classrooms in the United States continue to become increasingly racially diverse as we enter the 21st century. Critical multicultural scholars argue (i.e., Boutte, Lopez-Robertson, & Powers-Costello, 2011) for teachers to respond to these changes by teaching students about race and racism in critical ways. Much like the teachers in the aforementioned narrative, many early childhood teachers are reluctant to teach children about race and racism for a variety of different reasons (Husband, 2010). Recently, drama pedagogy has emerged as a powerful tool for teachers to use to assist students in exploring and interrogating issues of racial privilege and oppression. Much of the current research (i.e., Booth, 2007; Wilhelm, 2007) related to drama
pedagogy and issues of racial diversity and equity centers on the experiences of students in the later years of elementary school and beyond. Relatively little is known about how drama pedagogy shapes and influences students’ understanding of race and racism in early childhood contexts. For this reason, the purpose of this critical action research study is to examine how drama pedagogy shapes and influences children’s understanding of race and racism in a first grade classroom. The research questions that drive this study are:

1. How does drama pedagogy shape and influence children’s understanding of race and racism in this early childhood classroom?

2. What meanings, related to race and racism, do children construct, communicate, and represent while participating in process drama activities in this early childhood classroom?

For the purposes of this study, drama pedagogy is defined as a method of teaching and learning wherein teachers and students explore specified themes and problems through the use of unscripted and improvised dramatic activities (O’Neil, 1995). During the first part of a dramatic exercise, the teacher will typically present a problematic background scenario for students to consider. Next, the teacher assigns students to different roles while giving them a specific set of instructions to carry out. These instructions require students to utilize dramatic tools and resources (i.e., Hot Seat, Radio Show, Tableaux, etc.). The teacher repeats this step several times while assigning students to different roles and creating different scenarios. Finally, the teacher ends the activity by reconvening the students as a whole group and providing an opportunity for them to reflect on their thinking and feelings during the dramatic activities. This critical reflection can transpire verbally, in writing, and or in some other mode.
Theoretical Frameworks

This study draws from theoretical perspectives on social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978; Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976). More specifically, this study draws from Vygotsky’s notion of the zone of proximal development. In short, the *zone of proximal development (ZPD)* is a dynamic region between what a student can accomplish or understand on his or her own and what a student can accomplish or understand with the help of a more competent peer or adult in the classroom. Students progress from one developmental level to a higher one through *scaffolding* or on-going assistance, guidance, and direction from others within the ZPD. In keeping with this theoretical framework, drama pedagogy creates “zones” or spaces within the classroom where students interact with others to construct, communicate, and represent *intersubjective* or shared meanings and understanding(s) of race and racism.

This study also draws from theoretical perspectives related to critical literacy. In short, critical literacy refers to a pedagogical approach to reading and writing that emphasizes the political, social, cultural, historical, and economic forces that influence students’ lives (Ciardiello, 2004). Critical literacy is an active, dialogic, and dialectical approach to literacy whereby students and teachers become conscious of various forms of injustice in society. Once these injustices have been identified, students and teachers begin constructing ways of resisting and reversing these forces in their own lives and within the larger society around them. This goal is best facilitated by prompting students to question why things are the way they are in society and the degree to which particular groups in society (i.e., racial, economic, gender, etc.) benefit from the way things are in society (Beck, 2005; Comber & Nixon, 1999). Further, the texts involved in this unit were explored from a critical perspective while attending specifically to issues of racial injustice.
Notably, Kamler (1997) notes that the body exists as a “text” that is used to construct social meanings of gender, race, sexuality, class, age, and ability. Moreover, the body reproduces, reinforces, and re-appropriates these meanings on a daily basis through its various expressions (e.g. speech, movements, gestures, dress). In keeping with this line of thinking, critical literacy should also consider the ways in which the body is used to construct and communicate meaning related to issues of power and injustice (Blackburn, 2003; Bomer & Laman, 2004; Johnson & Vasudevan, 2012; Youdell, 2006).

A critical approach to literacy invites students to use their bodies as a means of constructing and communicating meanings of racial oppression and marginalization in society. The dramatic activities implemented in this unit provide students with these opportunities to construct and communicate meanings of race and racism in the world around them.

**Literature Review**

**Antiracism**

The present study draws from and is situated within anti-racist scholarship in educational settings (i.e., Attwood, 2011; Case & Hemmings, 2005; Derman-Sparks & Phillips, 1997; Gilborn, 1996; Lawrence, 2005). The vast majority of anti-racist scholarship outlines ways in which teachers and teacher educators can identify and resist systemic forms of racism within normal school practices and polices (i.e., curriculum, discipline, tracking, parental involvement, etc.). For example, Louis Derman-Sparks and Carol Phillips (1997) conceptualize four different levels of anti-racist multicultural education. The most basic level involves teachers engaging in a single event or activity. This level is problematic because it frequently leads to an increase in stereotypes about a particular racial/cultural group. The next level is known as the project or unit approach. This level involves inserting something substantive with regard to race/culture into the
existing curriculum. This, for example, might involve teaching a unit on Native American history. The third level, commonly known as the integrated or transformative level, involves integrating multicultural content throughout all subject areas. This level encourages students to be critical of knowledge and of the ways in which it is constructed. The final level is known as social action. This level involves encouraging students to act for social justice. Within this body scholarship, little is known about how early childhood students construct and communicate their understandings of race and racism while participating in a formal unit based in critical and antiracist perspectives. The present study contributes to this gap within the scholarship.

A second theme within the anti-racist education scholarship relates to how White Privilege exists and operates within the societal and schooling processes (McIntosh, 1990; Pennington, Brock, & Ndura, 2012; Seidl & Hancock, 2011). In contrast to the aforementioned theme, much of this scholarship centers on the experiences of White scholars, teachers, and teacher educators as they work to examine and deconstruct the impact of racial privilege in their own lives and the lives of their students. For example, Vivian Paley (2000), discusses how not discussing racial difference in her classroom (consisting of predominately Black children) complicated the racial identity development processes of several of the Black children in her classroom. Despite her attempts to ignore race in her classroom, it (race) remained an influential factor in peer-to-peer relationships, teacher-to-peer relationships, and teaching and learning interactions.

Little is known about how early childhood students think about and respond to notions of White Privilege in society. The present study contributes to this gap within the scholarship as it examines how students respond to notions of racism and White privilege while participating in anti-racist unit on African American history.
It is important to note here that some early childhood educators may argue that teaching young children about race and racism is not developmentally appropriate. However, several research studies suggest (e.g., Aboud, 1988; Katz, 2003; Husband, 2010) that young children are very capable of understanding race and racism in many of the same ways as older children and adults. In addition, other studies (e.g. Ausdale & Feagin, 2002; Marsh, 1992; Ramsey, 2006) show that children begin formulating biased stereotypes of individuals from particular racial groups as early as preschool. Thus, it is quite appropriate for teachers to begin the dialogue around racial justice and injustice during the early childhood years of school.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) (2005) advocate for teachers of young children to engage their students in serious and critical discussion of race and other forms of diversity in several of its formal standards document (see accreditation criteria 1.D.01, 1.B.15, 2.L.03, 2.L.06 [NAEYC 2005]). To this end, the National Council for Social Studies (2010) advocates for teachers to incorporate issues of race, culture, diversity, and power in the curriculum in its recent standards document as well.

**Drama Pedagogy**

Research points out a variety of benefits associated with using drama in educational contexts (i.e., Bidwell, 1990; Bolton, 2007; Booth, 2007; Galda and Liang, 2003; McMaster, 1998; Wagner, 2003). Drama requires children to develop and employ many of the same language abilities and thinking skills that are essential to reading comprehension. For instance, a child who uses drama to understand stories must be able to express the important details of plot and character, word meanings, the sequence of the story, and relationships of cause and effect. This requires students to interpret, draw inferences, and apply their knowledge and experiences
to the story. In order to dramatize stories, students must first be able to understand them very deeply (Wilhelm, 2002).

Several studies (i.e., Crumpler, 2007; Edmiston, 1993; Wilhelm 2002; Wilhelm, 2007)) suggest that drama has the potential to contribute to children’s reading comprehension. For example, in his work in a kindergarten classroom, Crumpler (2007) used process drama techniques in a series of responses to literature. He began by reading a story and discussing the events and characters therein. Next, he structured a drama activity around the text as a way of soliciting responses to the text from the children involved. Notably, he found that the children became active meaning makers through these dramatic activities as they assumed multiple roles and positions as both reader and actors. Similarly, in an earlier study, Edmiston (1993), worked with first graders to create dramatic activities in which they took up certain themes and issues from the story Jack and the Beanstalk. By immersing themselves in character roles, they were able to have experiences from within the story world. After reflecting on those experiences, these first graders were able to “discover new insights into the characters, the themes, and themselves” (p. 252).

Wilhelm (2007) points to the benefits of using drama with readers who have been labeled as “struggling.” In Wilhelm’s work with middle school students, he found that drama helps “struggling readers” construct meaning from the text in an active manner. Essentially, drama provides opportunities wherein readers can experience and learn about texts from the inside perspective of taking a role and moving around the story, and from the outside perspective of extending or reflecting on the story. Although the aforementioned studies provide valuable insight into how drama might be used to assist children in constructing general knowledge from
texts, little is known about how drama might be used to assist children in constructing knowledge related to race and racism. The current study contributes to this gap within the research.

Methods

I used a critical action research design (Carr & Kemmis, 1986) for this study. As such, I developed and implemented a 10-lesson unit on African American history. The unit is based in critical literacy approaches and critical drama activities. The study lasted a total of three months. I spent one-month gathering materials for the unit and developing each lesson in the unit. I also spent two months implementing the unit.

Researcher Positionality

At the time of the study, I was the first grade teacher in a classroom and a part-time doctoral student in multicultural education at a large Research Extensive university in the Midwest section of the United States of America. Having explored the works of several critical multicultural educators (i.e., Gloria-Ladson Billings, James Banks, Louis Derman-Sparks, Paulo Freire, etc.) during my graduate studies, I became deeply committed to issues of racial justice in teaching from both an ethical and democratic standpoint. Therefore, I deemed it imperative to teach my students about race and racism in ways that moved them beyond traditional and superficial notions. Also, as an African American teacher who was working in a classroom context comprised of predominately African American children, I felt an equal political responsibility to teach my students about race and racism in ways that were critical and untraditional. Essentially, having experienced firsthand some of the discrimination associated with racial injustice in schools and society, I felt I was doing my students a disservice by not integrating some of this knowledge, wisdom, experience into my teaching practices.
Setting/Participants

This study takes place in a first grade classroom of 28 students in an urban P-5 elementary school in the Midwest portion of the United States of America. At the time of the study, I was the regular classroom teacher. Three students in the classroom were White. One student was of mixed racial heritage (African American and Asian American). There were two Latino students in the classroom. Twelve students in the class were girls and 16 students were boys. A total of 23 out of the 28 students qualified for free or reduced lunch.

Data Sources

Three data sources were involved in this study: video recorded observations, teacher/research journal entries, and student writing samples. I used a video camera to record the lessons that were taught in the unit. I transcribed the video recordings of the drama events in each lesson and included these transcriptions in the data analysis processes. I reflected on the events in each lesson in a teacher/researcher journal (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). I collected the student work samples and used them as a third source of data within the study.

Data Analysis

In keeping with a qualitative approach to data analysis, four steps were involved in the data analysis process. First, I transcribed the video recordings of the dramatic activities in each lesson. Next, I coded the data using an axial or open-ended process (Charmaz, 2006). Codes were assigned to each line in the transcript. After rereading through the coded transcript several times, I recoded each line in the transcript using a closed ended coding process (Charmaz, 2006). Third, I developed three analytical categories and sorted the coded data into these categories based on common themes and patterns that emerged in and between the coded data. Finally, I established assertions in the data that were supported by at least two evidentiary warrants.
I established validity in this study in three distinct ways. First, in keeping with a teacher/researcher perspective, I remained systematic (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) throughout the data collect processes. Next, I maintained a teacher/researcher journal wherein I was critically reflexive about my roles as both the teacher and the researcher in the study. Third, I triangulated the data prior to establishing assertions (Patton, 2002).

**Curriculum**

The curriculum consisted of 10 lessons on African American history. The lessons were organized in a chronological fashion, beginning with the capture of Africans on the continent of Africa and ending with the Civil Rights movement. The lessons in the unit were approximately 60 minutes in length. Approximately 30 minutes of each lesson was spent reading and discussing texts and engaging in critical drama activities (Doyle, 1993) designed to facilitate critical thinking. Students were allotted approximately 30 minutes at the end of each lesson to respond to various prompts in writing. Each of the prompts corresponded with the themes, events, texts, and dramatic activities presented in each lesson (see Table 1 and Table 2).
Table 1:
Overview of the Unit

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lesson Number</th>
<th>Lesson Title</th>
<th>Description of Drama Activities</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Origins, Beginnings of Slavery</td>
<td>The students and I dramatized various roles involved in moving through the “Door of No Return”. At the completion of this dramatization, my students and I engaged in a discussion related to their experiences as Africans, Europeans, and travel through the slave castles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Journey To America</td>
<td>The process drama in this lesson involved two different activities. First, to build on the previous lesson, the students re-enacted walking through the “Door of No Return” as both Africans and European slave captors. Second, the students and I enacted what life was like on a slave ship. My intent in this second activity was to capture, to some degree, the physical proximity of Africans during their captivity on a slave ship. The students and I actually positioned themselves on top of each other on a small mat during this activity. I asked the students to enact what the African people did and said during this experience. The subsequent discussion revolved around the experiences of both the Europeans and Africans while aboard slave ships.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Plantation Life</td>
<td>The process drama in this lesson involved enacting roles as both the slave masters and the slaves while working on plantations. The students and I took turns assuming roles as both the slaves and slave masters. We dramatized several ways in which the slaves and slave masters behaved and communicated while working on the plantations. The discussion portion of the lesson emphasized their experiences as slaves and slave masters.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Slave Resistance and Escape</td>
<td>The process drama in this lesson involved two activities. First, my students and I pretended to travel along the Underground Railroad in secrecy as runaway slaves. Next, we divided into two different groups and pretended to be both runaway slaves and slave masters. We enacted the experiences and language both of these groups embodied during these experiences. Again, the discussion focused on our experiences in role as well as the roles themselves.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Anti-Slavery and Abolitionist Movement</td>
<td>The process drama in this lesson involved my students and I pretending to be ‘runaway’ slaves on the Underground Railroad. We dramatized the role Harriet Tubman played as a relentless and sometimes confrontational leader in this endeavor. We also dramatized the tensions between</td>
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</table>
escaping slaves and slave masters who re-captured them. Finally, we further complicated the drama by integrating the role of the abolitionists.

6 Civil War
We dramatized the war between the Union and Confederate Armies from both perspectives. Next we dramatized the actions and language the Confederate Army embodied as they lost the war. We discussed our roles as Confederate and Union army soldiers. Finally, we dramatized the actions and language the Confederate Army embodied as they won the war. The subsequent discussion revolved around their roles as members of the Confederate and Union armies.

7 Reconstruction
The process drama in this lesson involved my students and I pretending to be members of the Klu Klux Klan who encountered a Black man walking alone one night. Next we pretended to perform a ‘night ride’ on an African American family. We discussed our roles as KKK members.

8 Jim Crow
We dramatized the historic moment in 1960 when 4 African American college students in Greensboro, North Carolina refused to remove themselves from a segregated lunch counter. We assumed the roles of the police officers, college students, waitress, manager, and restaurant attendees in the drama. We re-enacted this drama several times with different students assuming different roles. I concluded the lesson by having students write reasons why they did or did not think the college students should have removed themselves from the counter or resisted as they did. My intent in this assignment was to engage my students in thinking critically about the consequences of resisting institutional racism.

9 Desegregation and Freedom Acquisition
The process drama involved my students and I pretending to be Rosa Parks and others key figures (bus driver, police officers, passengers, etc.) involved in her historic event on the bus.

10 Race in contemporary contexts
The process drama involved my students and I pretending to march from Alabama to Washington with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
Table 2: Overview of Topics, Texts, and Writing Prompts in the Unit

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lesson</th>
<th>Topics/Themes Examined</th>
<th>Texts Used</th>
<th>Writing Prompts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Origins and beginnings of slavery</td>
<td>If you lived when there was slavery in America</td>
<td>If I were being captured I would...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The Middle Passage</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Journey to America</td>
<td>Amistad Rising</td>
<td>If you were a slave on a slave ship, what would you have done?</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Now Let Me fly: The story of a slave family</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Plantation life</td>
<td>Now Let Me fly: The story of a slave family</td>
<td>Dear Slave Master,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>If you lived when there was slavery in America</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Slave resistance and escape</td>
<td>Almost to Freedom</td>
<td>If you were a slave, would you try to escape? Why or why not?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Anti-Slavery and Abolitionists movement</td>
<td>A Picture Book of Harriet Tubman</td>
<td>If you were an abolitionist, how would you help the slaves?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Civil War</td>
<td>If you lived when there was slavery in America</td>
<td>Instead of having a war, what could they have done to solve the problem of slavery?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Reconstruction</td>
<td>The Ku Klux Klan: A hooded brotherhood</td>
<td>Dear Ku Klux Klan,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Jim Crow</td>
<td>The Civil Rights Movement: Journal to freedom</td>
<td>Do you think the college students should have stayed at the counter? Why or why not?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Desegregation, civil protest,</td>
<td>If a bus could talk: The story of Rosa Parks</td>
<td>Dear Rosa Parks,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Freedom Acquisition</td>
<td>The story of Ruby Bridges</td>
<td>Dear Protestors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Findings

Through analysis of the data, I found that the drama activities that occurred throughout the unit opened up learning spaces or “zones” where children constructed, communicated, and represented multiple, intersubjective meanings and understandings of race and racism. These shared meanings and understandings of race and racism relate to: the salience of race, the subjectivity of race, and the systemic nature of race injustice.

Race is Deeply Salient

Through participating in many of the drama activities in this unit, children constructed and communicated understanding(s) of race and racism as politically latent phenomena. In this sense, race was viewed as a deeply contested political space whereby multiple parties have and continue to compete for equality and justice. For example, during the third lesson in the unit, my students and I read and discussed select passages from Now Let Me Fly: The Story of a Slave Family by Dolores Johnson and If You Lived Where There was Slavery in America by Anne Kamme.

Next, we engaged in a drama activity. I divided the students into two groups and asked to imagine they were either slaves working on a cotton plantation or slave masters who forced the slaves to pick cotton. I positioned my students as both slaves and slave masters to provide opportunities for them to construct a more authentic and holistic understanding of racism and slavery during this period in history. I believed it was necessary for my students to learn about and experience both perspectives involved in this issue in order for them to develop a broad understanding of this issue. While I recognized that this pedagogical choice was a bit “risky” and perhaps discomforting (Boler, 1999) on many levels, I still believed that it was necessary for my students to better empathize with the emotions associated with racial injustice. The chief concern
I had about this pedagogical choice was whether or not my students would misinterpret their roles as slave masters and come to view this as something that was highly desirable. The secondary concern I had was over the degree to which my students would appropriately communicate what they had learned from this experience outside of the classroom. I was a bit nervous over how well my students would communicate their learning with their parents and guardians. I wondered if my students would misconstrue their learning and cause some degree of unrest among the parents/guardians of the children in my class. Nonetheless, I thought the potential benefits of developing a greater degree of racial consciousness outweighed the risks associated with this choice.

During this dramatic interaction, students began using both gestural and auditory signs to construct and communicate meaning related to how slaves and slave masters interacted with each other on plantations. The following video transcript demonstrates this process:

(Teacher establishes background context for the dramatic activity. Teacher and students are all standing.)

**Teacher:** *We talked a lot about how the slaves worked from dust to dawn picking cotton. We’re gonna close our eyes. When I count to three we are going to pretend we are slaves who are standing on the plantation and picking cotton. One…two…three.*

(Students begin using hand and body movements and gestures to signify the act of picking cotton. See Figure 1)
Teacher: Remember they were picking cotton all day and night long. How did your body feel?

(Students begin formulating additional gestures to construct and communicate meaning related to how the slaves possibly felt.)
Teacher: Now freeze! Think for a moment about the slave masters. When I count to three think about what the slave masters did while the slaves picked cotton.

One…two…three…now you are a slave master.

(Students begin formulating gestures and words to construct and communicate meaning related to how slave masters potentially harmed many slaves. See Figure 2)

Student 1: Get em…get em….. (while gesturing in a violent motion)

Other Students: (Begin making violent gestures)

Figure 2: Students pretending to be slave masters

Teacher: (Divides students into two groups standing side by side) Now. The people on this side will be the slave masters and the people on this side will be the slaves. When I count down from five we are going to pretend. Five…four…three..two..one.

(Students begin using gestures and words to signify conflict between interests being represented. See Figure 3)
Essentially, in this lesson, students became aware of the competing interests between the
slaves and slave masters during this period of time in history. What becomes evident in this
example is that drama provided a space within the lesson where students began to move from
superficial notions of race to better understanding race as a political space wherein multiple
parties are competing for varying interests.

**Race is Deeply Subjective**
This second shared understanding of race and racism that emerged in and across the dramatic activities in this unit pertained to the notion of race as a phenomenon that is experienced in different ways by people of the same racial backgrounds. In this sense, for example, white people do not all have the same shared experiences related to race and racism. While some white people in society may be racist, others may be indifferent to racism. Yet and still, other white people in society may even be racial activists. In lesson 5 the students and I read and discussed A Picture Book of Harriet Tubman by David Adler. We talked about Harriet Tubman, Nat Turner, and Fredrick Douglas. We also discussed various concepts associated with the abolitionist movement. During the dramatic activity, the students began to wrestle with the idea that some whites worked toward helping slaves achieve freedom. At the same time, the students and I discussed how some slaves refused to try to escape from the plantation. This process is evidenced in the following transcript:

(Teacher divides students into three groups: runaway slaves, slave masters, and slaves on the plantation. One student pretends to be Harriet Tubman)

**Teacher:** *When I count down from 5 think about what you would do in this situation.*
*Freedom is that way. Five...four...three...two...one.*

(Students begin using their bodies motions and language to enact various decisions. Some students stay on the plantation while other students move toward freedom. Some of the slave masters attempt to help the slaves while other slave master begin using violence against the slaves. (See Figure 4).)

**Teacher:** *Okay...freeze...now let’s discuss what happened.*

(Students return to the carpet and begin the debriefing process)
**Teacher:** How did it feel being Harriet Tubman? What did it feel like when you were trying to escape?

**Student 1:** It felt good!

**Teacher:** What felt good about it?

**Student 1:** It felt good because the slave masters weren’t whipping us anymore.

**Teacher:** Who has something different to add?

**Student 2:** It felt good because Harriet Tubman took us to freedom.

**Teacher:** What did it feel like being a slave master?

**Student 3:** It felt great!

**Teacher:** Why did it feel great?

**Student 3:** It felt great because I got to do whatever I wanted. (Student 3 covers her face in shame.)

**Teacher:** Okay. Does anybody have something different to add?

**Student 4:** It felt good!

**Teacher:** Why did it feel good?

**Student 4:** It felt good leading some slaves to freedom.

**Teacher:** Very good! Does anyone have anything different to add?

**Student 5:** It felt good because I liked helping David get to freedom.

**Teacher:** Did anybody feel bad?

**Student 6:** I felt bad because I hurt some people.

**Teacher:** Okay.

**Student 7:** I felt bad.

**Teacher:** Why did you feel bad?
Student 8: *I felt bad because I wasn’t the slave master.*

In this dramatic interaction, students began to construct and communicate notions of race as a largely complicated concept. That is, they began to see race as a largely subjective and varied construct. While some students viewed being a slave master as a negative positionality for seemingly obvious reasons, other students viewed being a slave master as a positive positionality for other less obvious reasons. In this sense, students began to move beyond essentialized and oversimplified notions to race to seeing race as a deeply complicated concept that varies from person to person.

**Race is Deeply Systemic**

The third understanding of race and racism that emerged throughout this unit centers on the notion that racial injustice is deeply embedded within the policies and practices in society.
Essentially, students learned how some people in society worked in collective fashion to enact racist policies and practices that were systemic in nature. This meaning of race and racism is best captured in lesson 10 whereby students enacted the moment in epic history when Ruby Bridges entered an all-white school for the first time. After reading and discussing the events associated with this event, the students were asked to pretend they were involved in the events that transpired that memorable day in history. The students were divided into two groups to represent the white protesters who stood outside of the school. One student was assigned the role of Ruby Bridges. Two other students pretended to be members of the National Guard (see Figure 5 and Figure 6). The students who pretended to be “protestors” were asked to use body language and words to enact the events that probably happened. The drama unfolded as follows:

Figure 5: Students pretending to be Rudy Bridges
Figure 6: Students pretending to be white protestors

(Teacher address the students who are pretending to be the protestors)

**Teacher:** *I’m gonna give you 30 seconds to think about what you want to say.*

(Students begin discussing possible remarks to make during the activity)

**Teacher:** *When I count down from ten we will begin. Remember that the white people outside of the school didn’t want her (Ruby) to come inside. They never touched her. They didn’t cross the line. They stayed right there. When I count down from ten begin.*

(Student who is pretending to be Ruby Bridges begins walking toward the other students while being escorted by two students who are pretending to be members of the National Guard.)

**Other Students:** (Begin to yell and scream and use body language to signify negative language and emotions toward Ruby Bridges) (see Figure 6 and Figure 7).
Figure 7: Students pretending to be white protestors

During the subsequent debriefing, the students and I discussed how it felt being one of the white protestors outside of the school. Most of the students reported experiencing negative emotions while pretending to be members of a group of people who committed overt acts of discrimination toward Ruby Bridges. The debriefing transcript is as follows:

Teacher: What did it feel like being part of the protestors?

(Several students raise their hands)

Student 1: It felt good!

Teacher: He said it felt good. What felt good about being a protestor?

(Student 1 pauses and does not provide an answer to the question)

Teacher: Did anybody think it felt bad?
Student 1: *I didn’t like yelling at them.*

Teacher: *Okay….he said he didn’t like yelling at them.*

Teacher: *How do you think Ruby Bridge felt?*

Student 2: *Sad….because everybody was yelling.*

Student 3: *Sad…because people were saying mean things to her.*

Teacher: *How many people think they would’ve turned around if they were Ruby?*

(Four students raise their hands)

Teacher: *How many people think they would’ve keep going?*

(The majority of the students raise their hands.)

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine how drama pedagogy contributes to children’s understanding of race and racism in an early childhood classroom. Data from this study indicate that drama, as a pedagogical strategy, creates spaces in the classroom where children can construct and communicate meanings of race and racism in multiple modes. Essentially, drama pedagogy provides students with greater opportunities to construct and express meaning in ways that are not as readily available within traditional approaches to literacy instruction (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009).

Data from this study reveal that students in this classroom depended heavily on body language to construct and represent meanings of race and racism. In keeping with Kamler’s (1997) notion of the body as a form of text, the students in this classroom used their bodies as texts that were read and responded to by the other students in the classroom. With that said, two important implications can be drawn from this study. First, drama can be used to help young children develop a sense of emotional literacy toward and about the experiences of marginalized
groups during this period in history. Not only did the dramatic exercises provide an opportunity for students to construct cognitive meanings related to race and racism, the exercises also provided spaces where students could “feel” (Boler, 1999) the emotions associated with being members of groups who benefited from, and were marginalized by, racism during this period in history. Further, as Boler (1999) reminds us, experiencing emotional discomfort is a necessary first part of teaching for social change.

The data from this study also indicate the potential of using drama to contribute to children’s understanding of race and racism. In this sense, drama exists as a form of performative assessment that teachers can use to document children’s thinking related to what they learned about race and racism throughout a particular lesson.

I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the potential challenges and/or risks associated with teaching young children about race and racism in such a critical manner. I realize that other teachers who teach children about racial injustice in an equally critical manner may be subject to a range of negative political and professional consequences. While I cannot ensure that teachers who engage in this and similar forms of politically latent, emotionally charged, and openly anti-racist pedagogical practices will not experience some degree of negative consequences, I can recommend three practices that might minimize the impact of these consequences for all individuals involved.

First, I recommend that teachers who plan to engage young children in critical discussions of racial injustice should inform the parents and guardians of the children in the classroom about the unit prior to teaching. Perhaps this goal can be achieved by sending home a letter to parents and guardians of the children in the classroom that provides an overview of the unit and a description of the lessons, activities, and texts involved. This recommendation will
help minimize the misunderstandings and suspicion that may arise from hearing about the unit from a secondary source.

Another way teachers might minimize the negative consequences associated with this form of critical teaching is by involving parents and guardians in the unit planning process. All humans possess a finite degree of knowledge, experience, and exposures about particular groups of people in society. Hence, it is possible for all of us to unintentionally misrepresent the historical experiences of various racial groups in society from time to time. This misrepresentation can work to further exacerbate racial injustice in society. In an effort to avoid misrepresenting the lived experiences of various racial groups and to provide a more balanced narrative of race and racism, teachers might consider involving parents and guardians during the curriculum planning process. Not only will involving parents and guardians in the planning process help eliminate the development of biased and/or inaccurate historical narratives, it will also help teachers develop and implement a much richer and nuanced version of history.

Finally, teachers might minimize some of the challenges associated with engaging in this form of critical practice by involving parents and guardians in the implementation process. In clearer terms, teachers can minimize some of the unintended consequences of teaching children about race and racism in a critical manner by providing an opportunity for the parents and guardians of the children in the classroom to participate in the dramatic activities with the children. By participating first hand in these activities, parents and guardians will develop a clearer and richer understanding of the overall scope and sequence of the unit. Through their involvement, parents and guardians could have opportunities to voice their own personal and political perspectives on various events in history. Essentially, this will help reduce the chances of particular racial groups being portrayed in a negative or biased manner.
In short, the United States will continue to become racially diverse. This fact warrants that teachers teach young children about race and racism in critical, creative, and constructivist ways that equip them with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they need to participate in a racially diverse society. To this end, drama pedagogy has the potential to help teachers engage in this task of preparing students who will work toward identifying, resisting and reversing racial oppression for all citizens in the larger society in both an adequate and appropriate manner.
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