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English teachers' racial literacy knowledge and practice

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This article examines how secondary English teachers in two racially diverse schools – one in Massachusetts, USA, the other in Ontario, Canada – described their knowledge of and practices for teaching about race and racism. The extent and quality of teachers' racial literacy knowledge and practice were considered in light of the literature on racial literacy, racial literacy instruction, and anti-racist education. Three approaches to racial literacy instruction were identified: apprehensive and authorized; incidental and ill-informed; and sustained and strategic. The paper explores the strengths and weaknesses of teachers' knowledge and skills in order to suggest content and structures for professional development in support of racial literacy instruction.

Keywords: English language arts; English teachers; literacy; professional development; racial diversity

Introduction

There has been a general reticence in literacy education research, and in schools, to talk and teach about race (Greene and Abt-Perkins 2003; Lalik and Hinchman 2001; Rogers and Mosley 2006; Van Heertum and Share 2006; Williams 2004). Yet as Rogers and Mosley argue, 'literacy education in schools must address race, racism, and anti-racism...to prepare students to participate in U.S. democracy' (465). This study follows in the emerging tradition of making race an explicit topic in K-12 literacy research (e.g. Dutro, Kazemi, and Balf 2005; Dutro et al. 2008; Rex 2006; Rogers and Mosley 2006). The article contributes to this body of knowledge by sharing findings from a cross-national analysis of the extent to which, and ways in which, secondary English teachers at two racially diverse schools engaged in racial literacy instruction. The paper further proposes professional development content and structures to support teachers' growth in racial literacy knowledge and practice.

Race, racial literacy, and anti-racism

In keeping with Omi and Winant (2006), this article conceptualizes race as 'an unstable and "decentered" complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle' (18). The superficial characteristics such as skin tone and phenotype that are frequently used to ascribe people to racial categories are devoid of meaning if not for the process of racialization in which particular meanings are ascribed to racialized groups which privilege some groups and disenfranchise others. While acknowledging the 'dynamic interplay' (Guinier 2004, 113) between race and other social categories

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such as gender that also work to marginalize individuals, Guinier and Omi and Winant assert that race is the prevailing narrative in the lives of racial minority individuals and groups. As a social construct, race predominately determines privilege and power or disenfranchisement and powerlessness for people in racially diverse nations. It is the dominant narrative in the educational and social lives of many racial minority children (Banks 2004; Gillborn 2004; Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995; Patterson 2002).

Racial literacy is an understanding of the powerful and complex ways in which race influences the social, economic, political, and educational experiences of individuals and groups. Guinier defines racial literacy as ‘the capacity to decipher the durable racial grammar that structures racialized hierarchies and frames the narratives’ of nations (Guinier 2004, 100). This form of literacy entails an understanding of racism as ‘a structural phenomenon that fabricates interdependent yet paradoxical relationships between race, class, and geography’ (100). Racial literacy involves a discernment of the structural, political, and economic circumstances or antecedents that underlie racism and disadvantage. For a racially literate person, race functions as a tool of diagnosis, feedback, and assessment of conditions within society and people’s lived experiences. Relationships between race and power, and the psychological, interpersonal, and structural dimensions of race are emphasized. While acknowledging individual agency, a racial literacy perspective admits the institutional and environmental constraints on individuals’ actions.

Understandings about the geographical, structural, and institutional embeddedness of race and racism have led to calls for antiracist education (Mansfield and Kehoe 1994; Ontario Ministry of Education and Training 1993; Troyna and Carrington 1990), and racial literacy instruction (Greene and Abt-Perkins 2003; Rogers and Mosley 2006) in the United States, Canada, and other racially diverse nations like England (Gillborn 2004; Ross and Pang 2006). Troyna and Carrington define anti-racist education as ‘a wide range of organizational, curricular and pedagogical strategies which aim to promote racial equality and to eliminate attendant forms of discrimination and oppression, both individual and institutional’ (1). Anti-racist education teaches students to recognize, and work to disrupt the deeply embedded, interconnected webs of racism in society that are sociological, institutional (the school being one), economic, and political in nature. Anti-racist education is thus complementary to racial literacy instruction that educates students to discern and work against racism and racial inequity in their interlocking forms and contexts.

Racial literacy instruction

A key instructional approach for teaching racial literacy in the English language arts is the use of literature that foregrounds the topic of race (Boston and Baxley 2007; Brooks, Browne, and Hampton 2008; Rogers and Mosley 2006; Sutherland 2008). Sutherland examined how studying Toni Morrison’s (1994) *The Bluest Eye* in a high school English class allowed black adolescent girls to use significant events in the text as a departure point for examining their racialized identities and experiences. This book describes a young black girl’s navigation of a black female identity in a world where she constantly receives messages that, because she is dark skinned, she is ugly. Through talk, the girls in Sutherland’s study interrogated socially ascribed identities, and claimed the identities which they felt authentically defined them.

In an after school book club, Brooks and others (2008) guided 17 black male and female adolescents in reading, discussing, and responding in writing to texts that dealt

with the influence of racism, color discrimination, and gender bias on black adolescents' identity development. The researchers suggested that teachers who use such texts educate themselves about cultural histories with which they may be unfamiliar and model interpretive strategies for students in which they draw on their own lived experiences and identities. They also called for teachers to model historicizing and critiquing the authors' representations of characters and events and their perspectives on, or messages about, race and racism. Rogers and Mosley (2006) strategically located texts that foregrounded race and racism in their determination to develop elementary students' racial literacy within an accelerated literacy instructional approach. In alignment with Brooks and others' argument, they used texts that conveyed different perspectives on African Americans during the Civil Rights era. These diverse representations facilitated students' recognition of the various ways in which race is talked or not talked about in literature and society. Conversations around these texts also facilitated students' and the researchers' apprehension and critique of their own understandings about, and practices of dealing with, race.

Students' inquiry into their social practices that are inequitable in nature (Heffernan and Lewison 2005) and into their racial and cultural backgrounds (Dutro, Kazemi, and Balf 2005; Dutro et al. 2008) is another approach to teaching racial literacy. The teacher in Dutro and others' (2008) study extended a project in which students were to describe aspects of their cultural backgrounds to examine disjunctures that arose in how some students described their identities and the racial identities that their peers ascribed them. The teacher's openness to discussing racial categories and ascriptions, and her discursive framing of race as an unstable social construct, allowed students to learn from each other about the socially constructed and contested nature of race. Such complex understandings are an essential component of racial literacy.

Discourse and racial literacy

In the studies described above, discourse was used as a pedagogical tool for teaching and learning racial literacy and as a theoretical lens for analyzing such educational experiences. Heffernan and Lewison (2005) used the concept of discourse to study how students were interrogating and reshaping their identities and social practices around gender segregation. They noted that as students' social practices changed their ways of talking about gender changed as well. Dutro and others (2008) drew on the notion of multiple discourses – ways of speaking, making meaning, and being – to understand how children's discursive positioning of themselves as members of particular racial groups were contested by other students who held different meanings about race. In a classroom that represented a polyglot of representations of race, students drew on multiple meanings and perspectives in constructing and reconstructing their and others' understandings of themselves. Rogers and Mosley (2006) also considered the relationships between discourse and race. They noted how discursive practices both constructed and reflected social understandings about race held by individuals and shared among groups. If left unexposed and unchallenged, they asserted, these discourses perpetuate racism. They argued that 'discourse may be seen as the crucial interface between the social and cognitive dimensions of race' (467).

As these research projects demonstrate, language is a sociocultural tool for making and communicating meaning and also enacting identity. This study was particularly concerned with how teachers used discourse to enact their identities and practices in relation to racial literacy instruction. Bakhtin (1981) was concerned with how social,

historical, political, and ideological forces produced a variety of socio-ideological languages or discourses in individuals and groups that he called heteroglossia. His work teaches us how to recognize these forces at work in the various discourses that people utilize to assert their world views. 'All languages of heteroglossia...are specific points of view on the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words...each characterized by its own objects, meanings and values' (291–2). Bakhtin emphasized the importance of the context of an utterance, how the meaning of an individual's speech, while 'accented as an individual utterance' (272) is also reflective of the environment and conditions which have produced or shaped it. 'Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life' (293) and the individual's utterance has 'taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment' (276). Consequently, the study further considered how teachers' discourses of racial literacy knowledge and practice reflected not just their individual knowledge, skills, and dispositions, but the historical, social, political, and institutional forces that impressed upon their expressed identities and practices.

Research design and methodology

The larger study entailed a qualitative inquiry (Lincoln and Guba 1985) into how racial diversity was addressed in English curriculum policy in Massachusetts, USA and Ontario, Canada; and in the curriculum and instructional practices of English teachers in two schools, one in each context. The two nations were chosen because of their interrelated cultural, historical, and political histories. The particular regions were selected because of their racial, cultural, and linguistic diversity and their geographic proximity.

School settings

Purposive sampling (Merriam 1997) was used to identify English departments in two racially diverse secondary schools, one in each geographic region. Both schools were located on the outskirts of large urban metropolises. The two schools were selected because they had experienced rapid changes in student demographics over the last decade that had resulted in an increase in racial, linguistic, and socio-economic diversity among the student body. Hence, these two schools seemed particularly fruitful sites for studying how English teachers were responding to increasing racial diversity.

The US school, Grand Bay High School, was the only public high school in a small, increasingly urbanized school district. It was situated in a town, where, according to teachers' reports, mostly Jewish families historically resided. The community and the school's population had gradually, and in recent years, more rapidly changed to include more socio-economically diverse African American/black, Asian, and Hispanic families – the result of increasing immigration into the nearby urban metropolis. In 2006, Grand Bay served a 991-count student body that was 47% black, 30% white, 15% Asian, 7.5% Hispanic, and less than 1% Native American. Forty one percent of students spoke English as a second language and low-income students comprised 20% of the student body.

The Canadian school, Maple Grove Secondary School, was one of over 20 government-funded secondary schools in a school district that serves a sprawling geographic area surrounding Toronto, Ontario. It is a comprehensive school located in what had been a primarily white and rural farming community that, with increasing immigration

and busing, was transformed into a culturally and linguistically diverse, middle-class suburb. In 2006, the school served 1067 students representing African, Asian, Caucasian, and South Asian racial/ethnic backgrounds, both immigrant and Canadian-born. While Canada does not report student data by race, prior research has compiled student demographics at this school (Hargreaves and Goodson 2006).

Participants

Seventeen teachers across the two schools participated in the study. In contrast to their diverse student bodies, teachers at both schools represented a predominantly white and middle-class demographic. All of the teachers at Grand Bay who participated in the study, as well as the humanities curriculum director, were white. (A seventh teacher, who was a person of color, was on leave at the time of the study). Grand Bay's teachers represented two generational groups. One cohort comprised teachers in their mid-20s through late-30s with between one and 12 years experience. Karen, Harry, Sam, and Pam belonged to this younger generation of educators. The second cohort included two veteran faculty and the curriculum director. Maria was a 22-year veteran special education teacher in her 40s. Isabelle, who taught and also served as the department head, had been teaching for 35 years and was in her mid-50s. The humanities curriculum director, Nina, was also in her 50s and had been an educator for over 30 years.

Participating teachers at Maple Grove were also all white and Canadian-born. Teachers' ages and teaching experience also reflected the two generational cohorts present at Grand Bay: a younger cohort of teachers in their early-20s to late-30s with between one and eight years' experience; and a second cohort comprised of veteran teachers between 41 and 50 years of age having 20 to 25 years' experience. April, Ann, David, Michael, and Paul comprised the younger cohort. Laura, who also served as Department Head, Sharon, Noelle, and Heather and Raquel, both ESL English teachers, comprised the group of veteran educators.

Data collection

Data for this article derive from in-depth, semi-structured interviews of the teachers. Interview data were gathered over a four month period. Teachers were interviewed an average of two times in sessions ranging from 45 minutes to two hours. Initial interviews focused on teachers' life histories. They were asked to provide demographic information, to describe their upbringing and educational experiences, and to talk about any experiences with racial diversity in their homes, communities, schools, or other social contexts that they felt had shaped their views about how diversity should be addressed in society and in school. Teachers were also asked to describe their preparation for teaching and in what ways their professional training had addressed teaching diverse students. In the second round of interviews, teachers were asked to discuss their impressions of how the official English curriculum at the State/Provincial level, and in their department, attended to diversity. They were also asked to describe how they addressed racial diversity in the curriculum and instructional practices they enacted in their classrooms. In responding to these questions, teachers provided examples of the texts on the official curriculum and described their adoptions and adaptations of, as well as additions to, this official curriculum in their own classrooms. Teachers also offered their opinions about, and experiences with, the ways in which

the official curriculum, the curriculum and instructional practices they enacted in their classrooms, and other features of school life responded, or failed to respond, to student diversity.

As an educational researcher and a woman of color inquiring into issues of race and teaching with white teachers, I considered that teachers might feel that their knowledge and practices of racial literacy instruction were being evaluated by an audience that held both professional and personal stakes in their responses (Foley, Levinson, and Hurtig 2001). I also considered that teachers' stated educational beliefs and practices of responding to diversity may not have always been faithfully replicated in their actual teaching practice (see Marshall, Smagorinsky, and Smith 1995). Yet because analysis focused on examining teachers' claims of racial literacy knowledge and instructional practice in order to understand what kinds of professional development might be useful, it seemed beneficial that teachers might have been expressing the best of what they knew and did in terms of teaching about race.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed thematically (Miles and Huberman 1994). Initial analysis entailed iterative reading of data, the development of broad categories based on emerging themes, and coding. Codes were developed inductively and reflected relationships within and among the various thematic categories. Analytic memos allowed for reflection on whether recurring themes were adequately substantiated by the data, what available theories might help explain them, and how they related to the findings of pertinent existing research. These memos assisted in the identification of significant themes and tentative findings. Subsequent rounds of writing theoretical memos facilitated in-depth explorations of whether tentative findings held strong theoretical and evidentiary warrants. Through this process, some tentative findings – those which lacked substantive supporting data or robust theoretical reasoning – were discarded. Finally, findings that held significant evidentiary and theoretical warrants were considered in terms of how they confirmed, challenged, or complicated prior related research findings.

Teachers' approaches to racial literacy instruction

Three broad approaches to racial literacy instruction were identified. These were categorized as: apprehensive and authorized; incidental and ill-informed; and sustained and strategic. Apprehensive describes teachers' fear or hesitancy to talk about race and racism in their teaching or to discuss racialized conditions at their school. Authorized represents racial literacy instruction that occurred when teachers were able to select, or were required to teach, texts on the official curriculum that contained a racial focus. Incidental refers to racial literacy instruction that occurred at sporadic moments in teachers' practices, for instance, when they or students initiated conversations about racialized events that occurred in the community. Ill-informed pertains to teachers' racial literacy instruction that was based on inadequate or problematic knowledge about how to address race and racism. Sustained and strategic characterizes teachers' educational philosophies and curriculum and instructional practices that were anchored in an anti-racist stance.

The data are presented through teachers' narratives that exemplified each category. Hence, it must be emphasized that teachers' racial literacy knowledge and instructional

practices contained rich complexities and contradictions as well. For example, a teacher may have expressed an anti-racist stance yet described some problematic practice due to insufficient racial literacy knowledge. It must also be stressed that these practitioners represented a wealth of valuable knowledge and skills in relation to teaching their subject to diverse students. Accordingly, the data are presented not to unequivocally categorize or stigmatize any individual teacher but instead to focus on the knowledge and skills that teachers hold, and the knowledge and skills that they are in need of, for effectively teaching racial literacy. This discussion about professional development is taken up in the article's conclusion.

Apprehensive and authorized

When teachers feel discomfort or fear to talk and teach about race, their opportunities, and their students' opportunities, to develop racial literacy knowledge and skills are restricted. Moreover, if there are few official curriculum texts that require or authorize teachers to teach about race, teachers' racial literacy practice, and their and their students' growth, are likewise curtailed.

Apprehensive

Ann was a first year teacher in her early-20s who described herself as white and Canadian-born. When asked to discuss how she addressed issues of race in her teaching, Ann conveyed a sense of caution and delicacy. 'I think that there's always opportunity to ask the students their own personal experience and after we've built that safe community we start asking about "how have you experienced this, say, discrimination?"' Not only was Ann hesitant to discuss racism as a curriculum topic. She also expressed discomfort when talking about racial segregation that occurred at the school. Ann recognized students' self-segregation by race within the school but was more reluctant to analyze its causes and effects.

I think that sometimes there tends to be cliques that are racially motivated but I think only because they find that that is their own community so that draws students in.... I think that it's good for people to be with their peers, but...I don't know what I want to say about that.

Ann perceived, though shied away from discussing, how failure to address the psychological and interpersonal dimensions of race (Guinier 2004) contributed to students' self-segregation. The school's neglect of the structural and organizational dimensions of racial diversity, a critical element of anti-racist education (Troyna and Carrington 1990), was implicated in Ann's descriptions of students' segregation along lines of race. Ann's discourse of apprehension on the subject of race reflected the pervasive discourse of silence about race in her school context (Bakhtin 1981).

Similarly, Sharon, a white, veteran Canadian teacher in her late-40s, repressed a nascent desire to engage in discussions with students about racial politics. Sharon expressed a palpable fear of overly politicizing the classroom and damaging or offending students in discussions about race, racism, and discrimination.

The other day I spoke about the Dali Lama... and in explaining who the Dali Lama was and how he lived in exile because he was kicked out or chose to leave China and why did he choose to leave, I thought, 'oh my God! This is too political!' I'm very aware not

to, I'm aware of not hurting people.... So it's very multifaceted here because it's so multicultural and I don't want to say something inappropriate.

Notable in Sharon's discourse was the choice of the words 'multifaceted' and 'multi-cultural' to describe the student population rather than the more politicized term race. As Rogers and Mosley (2006) and others describe, educators are generally more comfortable using euphemisms such as multicultural in the place of race. Ann's and Sharon's stories were illustrative of the need for professional development in racial literacy that addresses the psychological and interpersonal dimensions of race (Guinier 2004). Their stories also demonstrated the need for a school-wide anti-racist approach that addresses the structural features of school life that impact students' and teachers' interactions and experiences in the school environment (Troyna and Carrington 1990).

Authorized

Sharon experienced tension between her desire to engage in racial literacy instruction on one hand, and her fear of professional damage to herself and emotional pain for her students on the other. This strain was alleviated by her selection of an optional text from the department's official curriculum that supported anti-racist teaching.

The grade 12 teachers at the moment, we're three at the moment, the other two are interested in political novels, *1984*, *Brave New World* etc, and I've stuck with *Heart of Darkness*...I like the text because it teaches [literary] interpretation. But when they see what it's about, and it's about prejudice and it's about colonization and abusing other people, then they see that, you know, the lessons within the book are of value. And above that, though, they also really learn how to interpret because the book operates on many levels.

Sharon, who was both fearful about, and disposed toward teaching about race, sought congruence with officially sanctioned texts to afford her a measure of professional protection in teaching racial literacy. Even as Sharon described how she was able to teach racial literacy despite her concerns of being too political, she selected more benign discourses about 'prejudice' and 'abuse' rather than racism or racial discrimination.

April, another white Canadian teacher, in her seventh year of teaching and in her early-30s, provided another example of how a departmentally-authorized text compelled teachers, even when they may not have had the predisposition as Sharon did, to engage in racial literacy instruction.

One year, and this year as well, we studied [*To kill a Mockingbird*] and we had to have the discussion about the word nigger. And there was only one black girl in my class and before it was only two black boys and...it's this playful but cautious...making sure that the student is okay with talking about this and if they're not okay we still need to talk about it. So finding ways to make it okay and probing and testing...I don't believe that we just can't talk about things because there's a certain ethnic group that is or isn't in your classroom. It has to be dealt with. But you can be, I can be, conscious of what I'm doing, how I'm doing it.

Here, April's discourse revealed how this required text obliged her and her students to engage with race and racism 'we *had* to have the discussion about the word nigger' (author's emphasis). Her discourse also portrayed a lack of confidence in her knowledge

and skills to teach about race even as she recognized that ‘we still need to talk about it.’ She is ‘playful’ yet ‘cautious,’ tests and probes, and tries to find ‘ways to make it okay.’ Even as she described her racial literacy instructional strategies, she appeared to be working out within herself just what her stance and pedagogies should entail. She desired to maintain a critically self-reflective approach so as to promote students’ racial literacy skills while avoiding hurt and damage to her students, especially those of racial minority status.

One of April’s instructional approaches in teaching this text was to enlist the assistance of the black female student who April described as ‘very vocal, very empowered’ to help teach about the subject of race.

She was great when we had to talk about it. We were talking about the word nigger and she said, ‘ooh you can’t say that word! Ooh...it’s bad to be called that!’ And we talked about who uses the word and how not too long ago, the only people who...like, one black child could call another child that and how that’s changed again. She was bringing up Martin Luther and all these people [and] these non-black children were, just like, they were listening because she was so impassioned about it.

Again, in her discourse, April recounted that this student was of great help ‘when we had to talk about it’ (author’s emphasis). As she had previously disclosed to me, April was ‘learning from the kids’ about issues of race and culture. In this example of teaching, she described her contribution as ‘walking around the classroom’ and facilitating this discussion of race while also encouraging the black student to be a co-teacher. April’s ongoing growth as a teacher who ‘is learning to be more aware of these kinds of things’ and ‘get[ting] past the fear’ of addressing issues of race is to be emphasized and credited. This was a teacher who needed greater professional development support for consistent and effective racial literacy instruction.

Racial literacy instruction requires the use of curricular texts in which race and racism are the focus (Rogers and Mosley 2006; Sutherland 2008; Troyna and Carrington 1990). Sharon’s and April’s cases emphasized the need for anti-racist texts on the official school curriculum but also professional support in how to teach them. In Sharon’s case, she sought the authority of the official curriculum to support her decisions to teach about race. With her understanding that she could use a Eurocentric classic, yet teach it in ways that emphasized its undertones of racism, Sharon’s pedagogical strategy aligned with those advocated in Ontario’s 1993 anti-racist education policy. These guidelines encouraged teachers to expose to, and interrogate with, students the Eurocentric bias of the traditional school curriculum. In April’s case, she valued student diversity but addressed race and racism only incidentally as they arose in her teaching. Being required to teach anti-racist texts obligated her to engage directly with race and racism although it also revealed areas where she needed professional support.

Incidental and ill-informed

When issues of race are discussed in infrequent extra-curricular episodes or in bounded units apart from the core curriculum, students receive a hidden curricular message that race and racism are illegitimate or inconsequential educational topics. Additionally, when teachers hold inadequate or faulty knowledge about race, they may offer their students problematic perspectives from which to think about, and act on, racialized issues.

Incidental

Incidental practices of racial literacy instruction involved sporadic conversations about racism and racial discrimination that may have been initiated by students or teachers. These conversations were often sparked by current events discussed in the media or incidents that had occurred in the school or local community. Isabelle was a white, 35-year veteran US teacher in her mid-50s. She recalled how the media had been carrying frequent reports about pending legislation to institute a curfew for youth in response to a series of violent incidents in the community. Students had immediately perceived that these curfews were intended to keep black and Hispanic students away from community spaces. 'We had a great discussion the other day about the curfew in the malls that they're trying to do. There's a race issue right there. So they were all bothered about that.' Similarly, her colleague Pam, a white teacher in mid-20s and in her fifth year of teaching, described using a newspaper article:

...about what they called exotic names and how that influenced students and how there's a huge gap in achievement just based on the name, not even based on race, but based on the name. And we had a discussion about that and they loved it and they said, 'can we have more articles like those two?'

These two teachers described these types of articles and conversations as 'warm-ups' or 'openers' to prepare students for studying official curriculum texts that themselves were not focused on race. In so doing, racial literacy instruction was conceptualized by these teachers, and likely received by their students, as optional and unofficial learning experiences that, quite paradoxically, held great relevance for and applicability to their lives.

David, a white Canadian teacher in his late-30's and with five years experience, also taught racial literacy by using current events in Toronto. Such events illustrated for his students how racism and stereotyping were being reproduced in them through the media.

Recently, we've had the media with shootings etc. The most covered [shooting was] the white girl who was shot. And yet we've had about 52 black men, young black men, who may get a picture in the paper, but it's about 15 pages into the paper and it's a little bit about it, and then, you know, the kids see that, the students see that here, and sure, it's going to come up, and then sure it's going to reflect on some students' thoughts about well, you know, should I be afraid of them? Because in the media, what I see on TV, it looks like they all carry guns everywhere. And we talk about the media.

In this conversation, David exposed the inequitable media coverage of young black men who, like the young white woman in question, were also the victims of gun violence. He also taught students to recognize how the media was instrumental in perpetuating racism and discrimination and to be aware of how they were constantly in threat of this manipulation. As such, he used race as a tool of analysis and critique (Guinier 2004) of the media and, more broadly, of Canadian society. He thus illuminated the local geography in which race and racism materialized.

Michael, a white Canadian teacher in his mid-30s with eight years experience, censured his 12th graders Canada's 'homogenization' of difference which he saw reflected in some of the school's celebratory approaches to multiculturalism.

They [students] like to talk about clothing when we talk about individuality so I say to them for instance, 'do you agree that generally [our] clothes and even the styles are similar?' They agree. 'But when you look around the room there are people here from all over the world, from all religious and cultural backgrounds. And some of you here know that the style of dress where you come from that's considered normal is radically different [than in Canada]. So not only when we come here do we not feel free to dress differently or to innovate our own style, we also don't feel free enough to even dress in a way that is considered normal where we come from.... [Instead] what we do is we have multicultural day and you put them on and we put you on a stage and it's a circus. It's not serious and normal. If it were serious and normal, you would wear it every day. But we make a show of it and we call ourselves "multicultural.'" And so I see there being two issues...the cultural diversity background is an issue but also there's this almost homogenization that has happened that they don't seem to be aware of even though the cultural differences and the racial differences [in the school] are very prevalent.

Here, Michael modeled a pointed critique of the school's multiculturalism approach that appreciated cultural diversity but that, as in the broader society, ultimately subdued difference under 'normality.' He engaged with the psychological and interpersonal dimensions of race (Guinier 2004) by showing students how their views about their racial and cultural backgrounds were contaminated as they transitioned and acclimatized into new geographies that privileged other races' norms and cultures over their own. In this way, Michael highlighted the dynamic interplay among race and geography as described by Guinier.

Teachers' conversations with students about difference, race, and racism in society and in school are certainly a necessary part of racial literacy instruction. In their contemporary and media-based focus, such discussions serve as a continuous forum for teachers and students to discern and interrogate the perpetuation and embeddedness of race and racism. Yet in their inconsistent approach, teachers demonstrated a lack of knowledge about how or why they should engage in sustained anti-racist education. An incidental approach cannot sustain growth in racial literacy teaching and learning. In keeping with Guinier (2004), racial literacy instruction maintains the spotlight on race.

Ill-informed

Lacking substantive knowledge and skills for sustained racial literacy instruction, teachers' practices sometimes slipped into the area of 'ill-informed' where they were unable to facilitate thorough critiques of racism and devise appropriate anti-racist responses. Special education teacher, Maria, in the US, had engaged with the issue of racial stereotyping that occurred within students' and teachers' own cultural communities. Maria was a 22-year veteran teacher in her mid-40s and of Portuguese descent. She described how her cultural (though not racial) minority status sharpened her ability to analyze with her racial minority students inter- as well as intra-group stereotyping. 'I brought up that my family could tell Portuguese jokes, and it's fine. But when somebody else does it, sometimes people are offended by it. So we've talked about that; about how it's more acceptable within your own culture.'

Maria did not elaborate further on this discussion. However, such a conversation could be deepened to trouble this notion of acceptability of stereotyping within racial or cultural groups and how this practice might extend into cross-group stereotyping. Discussion could also explore norms about racial stereotyping that may govern certain racial groups and how acceptable perspectives and behaviors within one group may

be rejected when exported outside of that culture. Students could learn that their racial understandings are shaped by their interactions with others within their racial groups. They would learn, as well, to interrogate intra-group norms by considering how they take on different and sometimes harmful meanings and consequences as they traverse into more racially and culturally diverse geographies.

Raquel was an ESL teacher in her mid-50s and with 25-years teaching experience. A white, native-born Canadian, Raquel also identified strongly with her Eastern European roots. This veteran educator held frequent conversations with her newly immigrated students about how to combat racist treatment they received because of their English language learning status.

If you ever go through the moment where you think someone's being racist just be strong...bite your tongue. Look at the whole picture. You are, in fact, way better off than they are. You're learning English. You already have another language...

Raquel's instruction to students to 'bite your tongue' in response to racist or discriminatory behavior directed at them appeared to be rooted in conflict avoidance. Her goal was to build in students a strong sense of self-worth, that, because of their bilingualism they are 'way better off' than a monolingual, native English speaker. In fact, she did not address the reality of 'the whole picture' – that it is often white middle-class students who are fluent in English and then add another language that are considered 'way better off' than their monolingual English-speaking peers and bilingual peers who are learning English. She did not engage here with the interplay between race, power, and social class that Guinier (2004) argues for. Furthermore, Raquel did not appear to know a productive anti-racist response to encounters with blatant racism and so suggested silence.

In the situation she described above, Raquel might have worked with students on articulating these self-directed value statements outward to their antagonists in non-inflammatory ways. Indeed, she and another ESL colleague described how a frequent racial literacy instructional approach in their program was to perform skits related to racism in the school. Dramatic performance is indeed a powerful space for students to learn to identify and effectively respond to the instantiations of racism and discrimination they encounter in school and society. However, teachers need sufficient knowledge about effective ways to address racism in order to serve as skilful resources and guides to their students.

Sustained and strategic

In a sustained and strategic approach to racial literacy instruction, race serves as a diagnostic tool that guides teachers' curriculum and instructional philosophies and practices. The teachers who exemplified this approach discussed how their pedagogy was deeply informed by their commitments to teach about race. Karen, a white, first-year US teacher in her early-20s, discussed how, at the beginning of the school year, she set the stage for reading texts from a critical raced perspective. She talked with her students:

...about how each of our experiences affects how we read things because we're going to read characters differently based on where we come from. So in every single one of my classes I specifically picked a male student of color and I said... 'He's black and I'm white. How does that affect the way that we've lived our lives, how does that affect the way that we are treated and then the way that we're treated affects how we read?'

Rex (2006), in her study about how race is implicated in classroom literacy interactions, has argued that ‘in classrooms race is a discursive practice that constructs social relationship, personal identity, and academic knowledge’ (277). Here, Karen acknowledged this precept by constructing social relationships with her students where race was center stage. She did so by engaging students in discussions of how their identities and development of academic knowledge were influenced by their racial identities.

Michael, in Canada, also explained how racial and cultural diversity formed ‘the substance’ of teaching and learning in his classroom:

I try to make it the substance of what we’re learning or discussing. And it’s an incredible resource for me as a teacher, the fact that we do have this cultural diversity. When you’re trying to get students to understand that sometimes our perceptions are limited or that often we only see one side of a situation, let’s say even in international situations, it’s great...when we’re talking about the Iraq war and I have a student from Iraq in my class, that’s invaluable.

Raquel, in the ESL program in Canada, and her colleague, Heather, further spoke of racial literacy as a systematic part of instruction in which they taught their minority immigrant students how to address racism in the school and society. Heather, a white teacher in her mid-40s and with 20 years experience, described how she used dramatic role plays to build students’ racial literacy. In these dramatizations, students ‘acted out skits to do with school...the problems integrating into the school.’ Raquel also remarked, ‘We talk about racism. We do units on it.’ As explained earlier, teachers’ descriptions of their racial literacy stances and approaches did not always fit within a single category. Raquel’s case demonstrated this phenomenon. While in the preceding section, Raquel suggested a problematic solution to students about how to respond to racism, this was a teacher who took up the daily responsibility of addressing race and racism in her teaching.

Racial literacy instruction further illuminated for students the relationships between race and social class inequity – the dynamic interplay between race and class that Guinier (2004) described. Karen stressed the embeddedness of racism in US history that had resulted in persistent social class inequity. To do so, she extended the discussion of a classic Eurocentric text to incorporate conversation about the relationship between social class and race:

The Necklace is a story about a woman in France who’s poor and she borrows this necklace because she really wants to be rich and this is a very class filled story. So we started by talking about what class was...how upper class is not like your rich neighbor, the lawyer, but it’s more about the Bushes and the Kennedys. And we talked a lot about who gets to move up and who gets to move down and we talked about race in that too... and we ask well how did white people in the United States really make their money? Who made their money for them? And we talked about how they had slaves and how slaves weren’t paid and they were able to get all this money unfairly and how that comes into class.

Racial literacy instruction exposed and critiqued the hegemonic process of knowledge construction for schools (Banks 2004; Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995). David, in Canada, consistently interrogated the biased nature of the Eurocentric curriculum with his students and provided them with a more critical and balanced view of world literature:

I had Japanese writers [on the board] and I can see some of the students who are either from Korea, Japan or what have you, say ‘Huh? You put a Japanese writer on the board?’ The whole idea is we’re studying *1984*, *Brave New World* so a lot of that has

to deal with utopia, dystopia aspects, so I try to find as much as possible, again a wider range of things... I joke around with them, you know, the dead white guys I call them, right? Look at the vast world, there're many, many authors out there.

Likewise, he remarked that he enjoyed teaching students about the wide scope of mythology that is not limited to Greek tales: 'I say what about Africa? They say what? What about Chinese? What? Japanese. What about every country in the world? We get into Hinduism, Buddhism...' David also intentionally selected literature that gave voice to marginalized groups whose histories had been silenced and whose contributions had been erroneously or deceptively credited to the dominant cultural group.

Why do we understand that these gentlemen are all these prominent figures of Western civilization? How come we never know about the Arabic scholars?... I talk about in India with Mathematics. Some students [say] 'Calculus, sir, wasn't that the Greeks?' I say 'Calculus? I don't think so' [and] their eyeballs open! Some of the kids say, 'Wait a minute! My culture has importance too!'

Racial literacy instruction revealed, reprimanded, and then revised the partial and often faulty knowledge contained in the school curriculum.

Karen purposed to respond to students' requests for a more racially inclusive and politicized curriculum which required her to search outside the official curriculum for anti-racist texts:

We just read Martin Luther King Jr.'s *I Have a Dream* [speech] and I have a student who said 'Ms K, we always read Martin Luther King and we never read Malcolm X. What's that about?' And I said, 'what do you think it's about?' And he very openly said, 'I think white teachers are afraid to teach him because he's a little more scary.' I said, 'that's a very good point'. And I said 'you could absolutely be right.' We talked about the difference between Malcolm X and Martin Luther King and how Martin Luther King was a little more peaceful and a little less aggressive and how a lot of white teachers might feel safer with that and then I promised him we'd learn about Malcolm X this year. And we're going to. And I'm going to create something so that I can bring him in.

Here, Karen took up the challenge of talking about race and power, and more subtly, but no less powerfully, she recalibrated the power relationship between teacher and student by allowing her students to decide the types of curriculum and educational topics that had the most meaning to their racialized identities and experiences in and out of school.

Finally, teachers modeled for students how to take action against inequity and injustice or trained them in taking such action on their own. Isabelle designed an assessment that required students to engage with the concept of political activism:

We're doing the Declaration of Independence in American Lit...I've expanded it and they're writing their own Declaration of Independence...so they can think about themselves, something they want to protest.

Maria illustrated successful advocacy on behalf of poor students, most of whom were racial minorities, that she recognized felt the public stigma of qualifying for free lunch:

When I first came here the kids used to have tickets that used to be for free lunch and it was these big neon cards so I said to the school, 'is there a little more discreet way that kids that get free lunch', you know, because I would assume maybe 60% of our kids get free lunch, 'is there another way that we can do it?'

Maria's action against unjust structures and processes in the institution of school demonstrated an important facet of anti-racist education (Troyna and Carrington 1990). She reported that the school had since implemented a new system that provided greater privacy for, and dignified treatment of, poor students.

An even more powerful approach would have been for Isabelle and Maria to invite their students to participate in anti-racist activism, or more generally, social action. Isabelle might have expanded students' protest writing into a more detailed inquiry project where students thoroughly investigated the issues that concerned them, shared their findings with an authentic audience, and developed and took some steps to address the inequity studied. In Maria's case, although advocating for students is an anti-racist approach, the end goal of such teaching is to empower and train students to advocate for themselves and for others. Hence, she might have collaborated with students in tackling the inequities present at their school. An overall critique of teachers who implemented a sustained anti-racist approach is that while they educated their students in anti-racism, they did not advocate for, or contribute to, broader department or school-wide professional learning in this regard. Teachers like Karen, Michael, and David had much to teach their colleagues about racial literacy instruction. Indeed, their own professional growth could be fostered by taking racial literacy education beyond their own classroom walls. The concluding section continues this proposal.

Implications for professional development

Bakhtin's (1981) foundational ideas about language concern the discourses produced by not only individuals, but the languages of social and professional groups – 'the language of the lawyer, the doctor...the public education teacher' (289). He argues, however, that stratification also exists within these groups' languages. As this analysis has portrayed, teachers at both schools displayed a wide range in the quality of their knowledge and practices in relation to racial literacy instruction. Hence, there is a need for collaborative professional development in schools where teachers seek to develop a unified discourse and shared practices of racial literacy instruction. Perhaps the most encouraging finding from this analysis is that all teachers admitted the need for this educational approach. This uncontested acknowledgment of the need for racial literacy instruction is inspiring when thinking about professional development as it suggests teachers' openness to learning how to teach about race. Moreover, this analysis of teachers' descriptions of effective as well as problematic practices of racial literacy instruction has illuminated areas for professional development support.

In highlighting areas for professional development, it is essential to recognize the vital role of professional learning communities in providing teachers with opportunities for collaborative inquiry into, and learning about more effective, context-specific practice. It is beyond the scope of this article to address the development and implementation of teacher learning communities (however, see McLaughlin and Talbert 2001, 2006; Lieberman and Miller 2001). The focus of this paper merits, however, a discussion of the types of knowledge, dispositions, and skills that must be cultivated for effective racial literacy instruction while proposing that such learning occur in inquiry-based, teacher learning communities. Teachers disclosed a need for structural support from their schools – an official curriculum that included anti-racist texts and a school environment that systematically addressed race, racism, and intercultural interactions among students and staff. They also expressed their needs for greater knowledge and skills to identify and interrogate with students instances of racism,

discrimination, and segregation in their school and in society and assistance devising effective ways to redress these injustices. Additionally, teachers desired support in moving toward a sustained and systematic focus on racial literacy that would permeate their curriculum and instructional decisions.

A school environment that maintains an explicit anti-racist emphasis can help foster a culture where teachers and students feel empowered to develop the knowledge and skills to talk, teach, and learn about race (Skerrett 2009). The Canadian case in this analysis clearly demonstrated the need for such an explicit anti-racist organizational focus as discussed by Troyna and Carrington (1990). A school mission statement – developed by leadership, faculty, students, and other stakeholders – that makes a commitment to anti-racism; systematic processes for addressing racism and other ‘isms’ in the social life of the school; and an official curriculum that is anti-racist in nature are important ways to establish an anti-racist school environment (Skerrett 2009). This culture of anti-racism is the foundation for professional development spaces for teachers to develop the dispositions, knowledge and skills for teaching racial literacy.

Engaging school leaders and teachers with the body of literature on racial literacy and antiracist education can assist them in developing sophisticated understandings about race and education. As these foundational understandings are being laid, school leaders and teachers can engage in analysis of their school – its organization, its curriculum, its relationship with families and the community – to determine the extent to which these features of school are anti-racist in nature, what changes are needed, and how these might occur. US teacher Maria’s activism on behalf of students receiving free lunch at her school and Canadian teacher Michael’s insightful critique of his school’s celebratory approach to multiculturalism are exemplary in this regard. In assessing and improving how their schools attend to racial equity, school leaders and teachers must explore how race, class, gender, and geography are implicated in their students’ academic and social experiences, interests, and needs. Reading research such as Anyon’s (1997) *Ghetto Schooling*, Oakes’ (2005) work on academic tracking, and Dei Sefa and others’ (1997) work on why some racial minority students drop out of school can be instrumental in helping teachers understand the importance of teaching in racially equitable and culturally responsive ways.

In revising their official and individual curricula and teaching approaches, teachers may work in collaborative groups (disciplinary, cross-disciplinary, or grade level) to locate anti-racist texts and devise ways to introduce or amplify race when teaching required Eurocentric texts. Canadian teacher David’s analysis and revision of the official curriculum is one such example. School leaders and teachers may also invite students and their families, community members, and university partners into these conversations about curriculum change. Teachers may also jointly develop assessments that allow students to inquire into and seek redress of instantiations of racism and discrimination in their school and local communities. Maria and Isabelle’s efforts are illustrative in this regard. They might also read educational research on effective anti-racist education and social justice activism efforts that have included students (e.g. Dei Sefa 1996; Oakes et al. 2002; Oakes and Rogers 2006). Colleagues who hold more knowledge and experience in racial literacy instruction can serve as teacher-leaders in developing a culture of mentorship, peer observation, and feedback. Teachers such as Michael and David in Ontario, and Karen, in the US, may be the ones who first open their doors for classroom observation as teachers strive to develop a culture of peer learning and support.

In this study, teachers' awareness of the need for racial literacy instruction and their instructional efforts in this regard illuminated the kinds of professional development needed to enhance teachers' racial literacy knowledge and instruction. With strong racial literacy knowledge and skills, students and their teachers can expose, and devise powerful strategies to redress racism in nations such as the United States and Canada that are struggling to dismantle their racialized hierarchies.

Note

1. <http://www.doe.mass.edu/nclb/>.

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