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Looking In to Speak Up: How White Educators Can Utilize Literacy to More Confidently and Competently Discuss Race and Racism with Early Elementary Students

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Looking In to Speak Up: How White Educators Can Utilize Literacy to More
Confidently and Competently Discuss Race and Racism with Early Elementary Students

by

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A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Literacy Education

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DEDICATION

To my family, who have always provided me with an abundance of unconditional love, encouraging mentorship, and compassionate support. Thank you for inspiring my love for

reading and learning from an early age. You showed me how books can open our eyes to worlds unknown. I appreciate you all more than words can express, and I couldn't have come this far without you.

To my content expert and cousin, thank you for being my sounding board for both content and mental health support. You are an inspiration to me in every way.

To my students, who make me smile and laugh on the hardest days, who exude love and compassion for others, and who deserve the world. I hope I have done you proud.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Overview

The topic of racism has been taboo in society, and especially in schools, for far too long. *Racism* is defined by the Merriam-Webster online dictionary as, “a belief that race is a fundamental determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). In recent years, it has become increasingly clear that teachers and schools play a crucial role in providing anti-racism education and promoting allyship in our future generations. While we as educators know the critical responsibility we have in our hands, obstacles of ignorance and fear can prevent us from taking action. I, like many other White educators, have allowed fear to lead to an avoidance of the topic. This fear of saying the wrong thing or receiving pushback from parents or administration makes many educators choose to stay silent, because it feels like the safer option. I can stay silent no longer. Through the Capstone process, I hope to provide a pathway and tools for other White educators to feel prepared and secure in discussing these difficult, but essential, conversations on race and racism with their learners. In this paper I have investigated the question: *How can White educators utilize literacy to more confidently and competently discuss race and racism with their early elementary students?*

In the remainder of this chapter I will share how my childhood impacted my implicit racism, as well as how my educational career, influential student moments, and higher education experiences awakened my passion for providing anti-racism education for my current and future students. I will provide an argument rationalizing the

importance this issue should carry for all White, early elementary educators. Finally, I

will outline what the reader can expect from the remaining chapters. **My Childhood**

Experiences

Growing up in a White-dominated suburban city, my exposure to diversity was fairly limited. Reflecting upon my childhood experiences with conversations of race brings me back to one event in particular. My class was learning about slavery for the first time in second grade. My memory of the literature and conversation boiled down to the concept that White people forced Black people to be their slaves; then slavery ended. My teacher expressed the narrative that this occurred a long time ago and slavery and racism are things of the past. During recess, I said to my best friend, Keya, "I'm sorry for what my people did to your people." Then later, on the bus ride to our after-school program, we got in an argument about something of importance to eight-year-olds, and I withdrew my sentiment from earlier in the day. She ended up telling one of our after school care providers and I got in trouble. The lack of open conversation about the topic of race and racism as it is present in today's world led me to a grave misconception about the significance my words would carry. I wish I had been exposed to more accurate conversation, literature, and instruction about the history and the persistence of racism in present day society. Instead, this experience gave me the perception that I should never talk about race ever again to avoid getting in trouble.

Given my understanding that race was not to be discussed, except in the context of history, and my teachers' obvious avoidance of the subject, I found that the main source of understanding racism as a child came from my family. This resulted in my developing several racist ideas from the adults in my life, who grew up in a very different

time where racist ideas were accepted as normal and justified. If my teachers had been more willing to discuss race and racism, I could have been exposed to different perspectives in my early years and this, in turn, would have helped me develop an anti-racist lens. As an educator myself, I know children come from all kinds of backgrounds and ideologies, largely influenced by their families. I feel a responsibility to expose students to many different perspectives so they may have the opportunity to learn and expand their own understanding of the foundations that make up the society in which they live.

My Teaching Experiences

Even with this sense of responsibility in mind, my understanding of how to incorporate these varied perspectives was primitive in the beginning of my career. I remember taking a cultural competency assessment in an undergraduate course. This assessment posed the question, “To what degree do you feel you have a culture?” and I truly didn’t feel I had any culture besides the Norwegian food that was often served at my family gatherings. It wasn’t until I studied abroad in Costa Rica and later moved to Mexico, immersing myself in cultures different than my own, that I was truly able to identify the aspects of my United States (U.S.) and Minnesotan cultures. I have since learned how this identification of one’s own culture is essential in understanding the pervasive nature of White normative ideology. This perception held by many White people that they do not have a culture helps define the understanding that their dominant way of living is the norm, and anything different and cultural is “other”. I feel extremely fortunate to have lived through experiences that helped me rectify this erroneous notion.

My two years living in Mexico also debunked another misconception I once held. I assumed teaching in another country would provide an escape from the racism I witnessed in U.S. classrooms and communities. On the contrary, the Eurocentric racism towards Black and Brown people I witnessed back home was replaced by superiority of Mexicans with Spanish descent over Mexicans with Indigenous heritage. Parallel structures existed between racism and economic disadvantage, just as it is in the U.S.. Local teachers at my school discussed achievement gaps and the familial disadvantage of students with darker skin and lower socioeconomic status, echoing the discourse I had heard in professional learning communities stateside. The term *discourse* “is conceptualized as a set of social practices that both construct and reflect the social world and benefit some people at the expense of others,” (Rogers & Mosley, 2006, p. 467). The students even held significant biases and acted on those underlying beliefs when interacting with peers of different backgrounds. While this was a discouraging realization, my experience teaching abroad only expanded my grasp on the way racist beliefs sweep the globe, and it further sparked my passion for exposing students to this real and crucial understanding for themselves.

Upon my return to Minnesota, I began teaching kindergarten at an urban charter school with a population featuring significantly less diversity than its neighboring schools and districts. One of my first conversations with colleagues at this school was surrounding a lawsuit that occurred a few years prior, which involved outrage from parents when a kindergartner chose to transition their gender and asked teachers and peers to use different pronouns for them mid-year. This was my initial indication that parents at this

discussed in class with their children. This only exacerbated my unease, stemming from childhood, at the thought of discussing race with young learners.

Students Who Influenced My Drive to Do Better

While I have struggled with this unease throughout my career, a few students in particular have inspired me to learn more about how to competently discuss racism in the classroom. The first was a boy in the class where I student taught, named Mohammed (names have been changed to protect the privacy of these students). Mohammed was the only student of color in the entire class, and he was also receiving special education services. It was apparent that other students in this kindergarten class noticed the ways Mohammed was different from themselves. Those noticings seemed to remain internal, until one day another student verbalized his racist thoughts. A group of boys including Mohammed were talking about their favorite superheroes and who they would be when they played superheroes at recess. One boy told Mohammed, “You can’t be a superhero because look at your skin. That’s not what superheroes look like. Plus, you’re not smart or strong like a superhero!” Mohammed’s excitement to play with his peers vanished and, even more importantly, his self image was trampled that day. I was shocked and crushed to hear a five-year-old not only verbalize this societal bias, but also to say these words to Mohammed’s face. From this day forward, I have aimed to grow in my ability to address such instances of racism in my classrooms. Additionally, I have since tried to find ways to proactively address racist ideas before instances like this occur, rather than only reacting after the fact.

Another student's positive sentiment affected me in an entirely different way. In an end-of-year conference, a student's parent notified me of a comment her daughter

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made while reflecting on our year together. Hannah had shared with her mom that our class was perfect. When questioned for more detail, she identified that our class had the most diversity and she stated how special it was to have so many different kinds of people in our class. She actually compared another class in the grade level to a box of goldfish, with every student looking nearly identical. I was delighted to hear how much our class demographics meant to this young learner. At the same time, I was saddened to hear that she was feeling anxious about being the only student of color in a "goldfish" class when she moved on to first grade the following year. This proved to be yet another example of how my kindergarten students are already forming perceptions of racial differences they notice. If we avoid the topic of race in our classrooms, as my teachers did in my elementary years, these students will be deprived of the opportunity to learn from multiple perspectives and the shared experiences of discussing these crucial topics.

Higher Education with Impeccable Timing

My experiences and student inspirations left me yearning to better serve my students' perceptions of race, and yet, I still didn't quite know where to begin. However, that changed in June of 2020. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, I decided to begin the Master of Arts in Literacy Education (MALEd) program through Hamline University. My first course was titled "Critical Literacy". I had no idea what this entailed until I read the first chapter of the text. *Critical literacy* is attributed to Paulo Freire's 1970 publication of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire describes his pedagogy as one in which teachers and

students are all active learners together through dialogue and sharing their many unique responses to text in connection with their varied perspectives and experiences. Critical

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literacy allows teachers and students to engage in important conversations on tough subjects with open mindedness, multiple perspectives, and respectful discourse.

Simultaneously, I was living in an apartment directly inbetween the site of George Floyd's murder and the Minneapolis Third Police Precinct. I was barely sleeping with all the sirens, helicopters, and unnerving behavior of some people participating in protests outside my window. I woke up to the smell of smoke every morning for at least a week. Yet, my personal concern and discomfort living in this area was undoubtedly of miniscule importance compared to the lifelong terror and trauma of the BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) community everywhere, but especially those living in my city.

While taking in the understanding of using literature as a means to present varied perspectives, represent diverse individuals, and discuss critical topics, I was also taking in a plethora of knowledge from my BIPOC neighbors about how to be an ally for anti-racism. The two concepts could not have been a better match, and I began to discover the path toward accomplishing my goals of more confidently and competently discussing race and racism in the classroom.

In my continuing studies, I was introduced to one of the most important and informative pieces of literature I have ever read. Through my time studying *EcoJustice Education:*

Toward Diverse, Democratic, and Sustainable Communities by Martusewicz, Edmundson, and Lupinacci (2021), I expanded my knowledge base on hierarchized society, its historical ramifications, and how its presence endures into present day

education. This text provided deeper understanding into known subjects such as environmental and economic racism and White privilege. It also opened my eyes to many widely used and accepted concepts of racism in education today. At times I had to take

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breaks while reading this text due to the heavy implications of the new knowledge I was taking in. I was often infuriated with myself for remaining ignorant to the ways I have allowed implicit bias and White normative discourse to contaminate my thoughts and actions towards the BIPOC community throughout my life. Between my newfound revelations of racism in education and society and my recent practice of critical literacy pedagogies, I felt I had the tools necessary to embark on a journey of research and finding solutions to better serve my students.

Professional Rationale

My experiences described above have led me to my own quest toward discovery, but why should other White educators care about utilizing literacy to more confidently and competently discuss race and racism with their early elementary students? Many White educators relate in feeling underprepared and unqualified to discuss a topic as significant as racism. We fear not doing the conversation justice, allowing our underlying bias to seep in, receiving backlash from angry parents or wary school administrators, and we even hesitate to know whether our younger learners can handle this big topic. I have learned, however, that what we should fear most is the powerful impact our silence can have on our students. According to Copenhaver-Johnson (2006), students notice when we avoid acknowledging race. This avoidance on our part can cause White children to perceive the topic of race as taboo, as well as to develop White normative ideologies and

stereotypical attitudes to make sense of the cultural differences they will inevitably observe. As I described earlier in the chapter, I had first-hand experience with these repercussions of my own teachers' avoidance on the topic of race.

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Educators' silence can also have damaging effects on our BIPOC students because without discussions of race, we fail to "validate the perceptions that children of color hold and help disrupt the quiet discriminatory practices otherwise occurring without adult mediation" (Copenhaver-Johnson, 2006, p. 17). Research shows that preschool and early elementary age children are already noticing race. As young as three or four years old, children begin to recognize physical and behavioral differences between themselves and others around them, which they then use to cognitively categorize different race groups. In the early elementary years, they start developing additional stereotypes, which involve internal characteristics (Aboud & Skerry, 1983; Powlishta et al., 1994). The experiences I have shared, involving my kindergarten students noticing their racial differences from others, certainly seem to substantiate these claims. Any educator can likely identify moments in their career when students have indicated a curiosity about racial differences. Every educator should feel prepared for these moments and feel confident that they have the knowledge base and access to tools that can guide them as they lean into children's natural wonderings and facilitate productive conversations about the ways race and racism impact the world in which we all live. This is the essential goal of my research, and I believe other educators will share this enthusiasm for personal growth and discovery for the benefit of their students.

Chapter Summary

As a White kindergarten teacher, I have long struggled with a dilemma. I know that it is important to discuss racism with my students, but I have also allowed fear and hesitancy to lull this understanding into a damaging silence. I will no longer allow my apprehension or my unpreparedness act as an excuse to avoid having powerful and

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imperative conversations about racism with my learners. This is why I have chosen to research the question: *How can White educators utilize literacy to more confidently and competently discuss race and racism with their early elementary students?*

I have described how my childhood education and experiences led to the notion that discussions of race were taboo and this allowed racist ideas to permeate my young mind unquestioned. My experiences living and teaching abroad opened my eyes to the reality of racism beyond the U.S. and granted me the opportunity to examine my own cultural identity, which in turn, allowed me to better comprehend the role of cultural identity in discussions of racism. I shared how my passion for the topic of discussing racism in the classroom was influenced by my students, my Hamline University MALEd program, and the ways my community was affected by the murder of George Floyd. Finally, I have detailed why all White, early elementary teachers should be concerned with developing their own skills in discussing racism in the classroom, due to the harmful effects of staying silent on the issue.

In Chapter Two, I conduct a literature review which investigates the various aspects of my research question. The chapter builds background through historical and contemporary racism in education, explores experts' recommendations for better

understanding one's own bias, investigates evidence supporting children's developmental readiness to discuss topics of race and racism, and concludes with ways literacy experts recommend using literacy instruction to guide these discussions. Chapter Three provides context for and the description of the project I completed through the Capstone process. In this chapter, the reader will find a summary of the professional development course I created, which aimed to support White educators like myself in building confidence and

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competence in discussing race and racism with their early elementary learners. Finally, in Chapter Four I discuss my conclusions about the effectiveness of my project completion towards answering my research question.

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CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Overview

White educators have long struggled with their place in the discussion of race and racism inside the classroom. The question of whether they are qualified to weigh in on the topic is a common one. If they do choose to speak on the subject, the question becomes *How?* Many barriers and reasons for hesitation exist, including: experience seeing teachers remain silent throughout their own education, feelings of White guilt and lack of experience with racism firsthand, fear of pushback or retribution from parents, colleagues, and administrators, and simply not knowing when or where to begin. As the reader will discover later in this chapter, there should be no question of whether early elementary learners are ready to engage in this discussion of race and racism. The time is

now and this chapter will serve to provide educators with clear evidence for their moral obligation to gain confidence in their ability to initiate and embrace these challenging but fundamental conversations. In Chapter Two, I will explore a body of research to gain a better understanding of what the experts have to say on the subject as I seek the answer to my research question: *How can White educators utilize literacy to more confidently and competently discuss race and racism with their early elementary students?*

This chapter will be divided into four sections exploring subtopics related to answering this research question. In the first section, I provide a background and context for the place racism holds both in historical and contemporary educational systems. In the second section, the reader can learn from experts in the field of race studies in order to gain a better understanding of their own biases. Furthermore, it synthesizes how experts

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recommend interrupting and minimizing the effects of bias on students. The third section of this chapter seeks to examine research from the fields of child psychology and education to ascertain the level with which early elementary students are ready to participate in conversations surrounding ideas and examples of race and racism. The fourth section investigates the ways literacy instruction can provide exceptional tools to support educators in feeling prepared and purposeful in their discussions of race and racism with their students. Finally, the chapter concludes with a brief summary and an overview of what is to come in the subsequent chapters.

Historical and Contemporary Racism in Education

While many educators have some level of awareness surrounding the history of racism in education, many have a skewed perception of these histories based on the

White-washed version they learned in their own upbringing. Moreover, most are unaware of the current manifestations of racism in which they consciously or unconsciously participate. In order to feel prepared for big conversations on topics of race and racism with young students, one must become knowledgeable in these historical and current practices. This section will briefly cover main events and racist practices throughout U.S. history. Later, this segment will investigate four main exhibitions of racism in more recent years: achievement gaps, deficit thinking, zero tolerance policies, and the legal constraints concerning how educators can and cannot engage in discussions of race and racism. Understanding the historical background of racism in education and currently accepted racist ideologies and practices is a crucial first step in dismantling the systems that bolster racism within the realm of education.

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Historical Background

In order to competently discuss race and racism with students, educators must first possess, at the very least, a basic and accurate understanding of the ways racism has affected the history of the U.S. educational system. Educators must be knowledgeable about the turning points in history that have changed the way racism is carried out within educational settings. It is important to note, the previous sentence does not indicate that racism has been eradicated from the education system. This is a common but erroneous assumption based on the language of certain judicial rulings and legislation passed throughout the historical timeframe to be addressed in this section (Paris & Alim, 2017).

Racism in the U.S. education system dates back to colonial times and the age of slavery in the country. Prohibiting Black people who were enslaved from learning

literacy skills became more and more popular as slave owners began to fear communication between slaves and uprisings (Martusewicz et al., 2021; Rogers & Mosley, 2006). While the 13th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution (1865) and the Civil Rights Act (1866) made important strides in abolishing legal slavery and the “Black codes” used to control Black people (History.com, 2009), these legislative efforts left space for innovative systems that involved new, legal, and freshly accepted forms of racism aimed at controlling the education of BIPOC communities. Segregation in education is the most well-known exemplification of this method of control.

An Extensive Period of Legal Segregation. Through much of the 1800s, while the Black community suffered the experiences of slavery, Indigenous Peoples in the U.S. also faced oppression at the hands of various forms of genocide being carried out by the government. One such form, namely *cultural genocide*, is described by Martusewicz and

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colleagues (2021) as “the use of schooling to destroy Indigenous culture” (p. 176). The research of Paris and Alim (2017) described how Indigenous children were forcefully separated from their families and communities. They were placed in boarding schools, which were charged with the goal of “helping” students assimilate to the dominant White culture, while more importantly ensuring students were punished for using their native language or embracing aspects of their native culture. As the practices of these boarding schools were brought to light, they began to close in the 1930s, but not before affecting several generations of Indigenous children and almost entirely extinguishing the languages and cultures of Indigenous Peoples throughout the country.

Even when students were not separated from their communities in boarding schools,

segregation was a widely accepted form of using racism to perpetuate unequal access to public education. Historical accounts found in the research of Paris and Alim (2017), as well as Martusewicz and colleagues (2021) indicate that various schools were relegated for certain racial minority student populations. Often these schools employed teachers of the same race, although some specifically employed White teachers in order to aid in assimilating students to practices and ideologies of the dominant culture. Segregated schools for Black and other racially grouped students were often found in low socioeconomic geographical areas. This came as a result of economic racism and the practice of *redlining*, which prevented Black families from qualifying for loans or being able to purchase houses in White neighborhoods. Some states even had laws prohibiting White taxpayer funds from being used in Black schools. Nonetheless, the Black community highly valued education and found creative ways to improve the quality of education for their children, even without access to much, if any, federal or state funding.

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Mexican-American children were seen as financially valuable laborers and often did not attend school. Those who did faced similar forms of the cultural and linguistic genocide experienced by Indigenous children. Chinese and Japanese immigrants became more common after the U.S. acquired the West Coast in 1850, which led to comparable segregated schools for East Asian students, maintaining the same goals of assimilation and teaching English and Christianity.

Martusewicz et al. (2021) found that many marginalized groups became fed up with the U.S. public education system and its inequalities. BIPOC communities began to create their own private schools, where they could try to keep their native languages and

cultures alive. More widespread efforts were made to improve the inequality found in segregated public schooling, especially because many families did not have the means to send their children to private schools for high quality education. The 1894 case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* tasked public education with creating “separate but equal” learning environments to improve the quality of education for BIPOC students, while maintaining the practice of segregation. The work of W.E.B. Dubois (1868-1963) is recognized for his endeavors to advocate for the civil rights of Black people and eradicate the laws of segregation, both in the education system and society as a whole. Though these efforts took steps towards providing marginalized students with higher quality education, segregation continued to be embraced until a well-known Supreme Court decision changed the U.S. public education system forever.

Legal Segregation Becomes Unconstitutional. Early research on racism and child psychology became instrumental in judicial verdicts and legislation which outlawed racial prejudice in schools and other sectors of society (Cristol & Gimbert, 2008). The

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Supreme Court ruling in the 1954 case of *Brown v. Board of Education* “ended the formal legal structure of segregation and helped to affirm the Civil Rights Movement” (Martusewicz et al., 2021, p. 175). In the place of separate schools barring the attendance of students from a certain race, legal segregation continued to be perpetuated in a number of ways, stretching into the 21st Century. One such example is seen in the phenomenon known as “White flight”, wherein White families left areas with growing BIPOC populations, moving to suburban developments with considerably less diversity. Another example is through the use of tracking systems within schools, which are designed to

separate students on track for college from those on track for jobs in the vocational field, citing the need for different types of preparation and education for each (Ford, 2014). Martusewicz and colleagues (2021) asserted that, “Students of color are disproportionately assigned to the ‘lower’ tracks that prepare students for little beyond the workforce” (p. 189). Through an extensive examination of national figures, Ford (2014) determined that Black students were 47% underrepresented in gifted and talented programs in 2011, while Hispanic students were 36% underrepresented. This, and related evidence, must be thoroughly challenged in order to identify and wipe out the place racism continues to hold within today’s educational system.

Contemporary Racism in Education

Segregation is not, of course, the only exhibition of racism within education. Both explicit and implicit bias lead to discriminatory policies and practices in education that often go unchecked. *Explicit bias* refers to prejudice that is held and discrimination that is executed consciously and with expressed justification. *Implicit bias* involves prejudicial beliefs which often hide under the surface and manifest themselves through unconscious

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discriminatory acts. These biases are deeply ingrained within common education policies and practices. Educators, administrators, and policy makers must take a critical look at the way these policies and practices are seen as standard when they are built upon racist ideas and beliefs. A few examples include achievement gaps, deficit thinking, zero tolerance policies, and banning Critical Race Theory pedagogy.

Achievement Gaps and Deficit Thinking. The concept of *achievement gaps* has become popular in the education world within the last few decades. These gaps are

common patterns seen in student performance data, which often demonstrate disparities in the lower level of achievement of certain students (often racially and ethnically diverse, low socioeconomic status, and non-native English speakers) from the higher achievement of other students (often White, middle to high socioeconomic status, and native English speakers). The goal of focusing on, and analyzing, achievement gaps is well-intended, in that it seeks to help lower achieving students succeed at a higher level. Unfortunately, if participants in these conversations are not cautious, emphasis and analysis can lead to perceptions of children's inherent deficits, or disadvantages, especially as they relate to race, socioeconomic status, and background experiences within their cultural community.

Educators and administrators searching for explanations of students' low test scores often blame lack of preschool education, lack of parent involvement, and lack of motivation as reasons for these scores. Assumptions such as these hold undertones of racism. Educators or administrators may believe that certain racial and cultural backgrounds do not value education enough, especially if their behaviors do not demonstrate this value in the same way as the dominant group (Rogers & Mosley, 2006).

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These assumptions lead to underlying beliefs that students from different backgrounds are inherently disadvantaged from the beginning of their educational careers. Researchers refer to these types of beliefs as *deficit thinking* (Ford, 2014; Martusewicz et al., 2021). Martusewicz et al. (2021) further described several specific theories of deficit thinking. *Genetic deprivation theory* refers to peoples' belief that there exist genetic differences

between the intellectual (and other) abilities of people from different racial backgrounds. *Cultural deprivation theory* assumes people from certain cultural or socioeconomic backgrounds are disadvantaged due to the difference in upbringing and values compared to those of the dominant culture. A third theory calls for students to be identified as *At-Risk* based upon cultural, linguistic, or socioeconomic factors, even before they have a chance to demonstrate their academic abilities.

Researchers who will not accept these deficit theories extend the conversation to ponder other explanations which may more accurately reveal the causes of academic achievement disparities (Martusewicz et al., 2021; Paris & Alim, 2017; Rogers & Mosley, 2006). Some of these ideas include analyzing the classist nature of standardized test questions, the expectation of background knowledge necessary to answer questions based on the dominant culture's typical upbringing, lack of student engagement due to the suppression of their identities, and learned acceptance of a long-lasting history of being prevented from reaching success no matter how hard one has tried. It is essential to caution educators in the way analysis of achievement gaps can lead to deficit thinking as an explanation for academic disparities. Educators must remain aware of, and reject, their own deficit thinking when it comes to their students. They must also keep an open mind

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to other explanations for achievement gaps seen in their data analysis, besides students' assumed capacity for learning.

Zero Tolerance Policies. Disproportionate disciplinary action toward BIPOC students is a form of "de facto" segregation and discrimination being upheld in today's schools. *Zero tolerance policies* are defined by the School Discipline Support Initiative

(2020) as “school discipline policies and practices that mandate predetermined consequences, typically severe, punitive and exclusionary (e.g., out of school suspension and expulsion), in response to specific types of student misbehavior—regardless of the context or rationale for the behavior” (para. 1). Disproportionate patterns of BIPOC, especially Black, students receiving consequences from these policies are evident amidst the results of various studies (Hassan & Carter, 2021; Simmons-Reed & Cartledge, 2014).

Hassan and Carter (2021) connect their work and findings to the concept of the School-to-Prison Pipeline (SPP). The authors describe the SPP to be “the disproportionate tendency of minors and young adults from disadvantaged backgrounds to become incarcerated because of harsh school policies” (p. 24). In an analysis of public disciplinary demographics across the U.S., the authors found that there was an overrepresentation of Black female students experiencing zero tolerance consequences. They further discovered that this overrepresentation was higher in states ranking above average in quality of education, while simultaneously these higher ranking states tended to have lower percentages of Black female students in their student demographics. Similarly, the study conducted by Simmons-Reed and Cartledge (2014) found that the number and length of suspensions were disproportionately high for Black males,

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especially those with disabilities. Furthermore, the authors reported findings that Black students are more likely to receive more severe disciplinary action and longer durations of suspension for minor infractions. This is especially alarming when compared to White peers, who the authors found to be more likely to commit more severe infractions of

conduct, and who tend to receive less severe consequences.

It is clear to see that zero tolerance policies have led to a disproportionate representation of BIPOC students, especially those who identify as Black, on the receiving end of consequences. Some may question whether the overrepresentation is a factor of bias in disciplinary actions or if certain students are more likely to behave in manners justifying their disciplinary consequences. This process of questioning circles back to the racist ideas associated with deficit thinking, discussed earlier in this section, presuming certain people are inherently more likely to misbehave based upon their race or cultural upbringing. Simmons-Reed and Cartledges' (2014) discussion comparing the types of disciplinary actions carried out with students of different races provides excellent evidence on the contrary, highlighting the existence of bias and discrimination within zero tolerance policies.

Legal Limitations on Discussing Racism. While some racist practices in contemporary education, such as deficit thinking and zero tolerance policies, are widely upheld and unquestioned, some anti-racist practices are under such scrutiny that they are becoming banned. Recently, the media has featured the legal battle against the use of pedagogy related to *Critical Race Theory* (CRT) in schools. CRT is a concept that dates back to the 1970s. Duckworth (2021) defined CRT as an “academic framework or practice that examines how systems, policies, and the law perpetuate systemic racism” (p.

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2). Even though this is not a new pedagogy, CRT has become more recently and publicly criticized as a result of heightened media attention. As of the writing of this paper, CRT has been banned in at least five states, with several others presenting legislation aimed at

either banning or limiting this pedagogy.

As the pendulum has swung from the tendency to rely on avoidance to the opposing territory of new learning and discovering how to competently discuss racism, it has become clear how White-washed many adults' educations were, especially in regards to history. One example is obvious in the way children were once taught the history of Thanksgiving, where teachers painted a picture of pilgrims and Indigenous People working together to prepare a meal to be enjoyed with new friends. As more and more adults have become better informed in the ways U.S. history is deeply rooted in racism, they have begun to see that this version of "history" is inaccurate and blatantly ignores the hundreds of years the White dominant race spent inflicting genocide upon Indigenous Peoples. Many critics of CRT, especially White parents, are concerned about their children feeling guilt for historical racism, in which they had no part (Hughes et al., 2007). However, banning CRT and similar pedagogy will prevent students from learning about racism. This will only perpetuate racist ideas and acts of racism in future generations, without giving them the chance to learn from the past in order to create a better future (Copenhaver-Johnson, 2006; Rogers & Mosley, 2006). *Summary of Historical and Contemporary Racism in Education*

Throughout this section, readers have gained a better understanding of the experiences of racism that affected BIPOC communities throughout history, as well as some pivotal legislation and judicial rulings that impacted the changing ways racism

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operated in the educational system over time. This section guided readers to develop awareness toward the ways racism is still impacting education today, albeit in more

covert manifestations. Expanding this knowledge base helps educators feel more competent in their ability to discuss race and racism with their students. In connection with this background knowledge, educators who develop an understanding of their own bias can build confidence in carrying out anti-racist work and defending its importance among colleagues, administrators, and others who may question their intentions.

Understanding One's Own Bias

The greater society often looks to education as a beacon of hope to abolish racial discrimination and develop a more equitable society for future generations. Many educators truly believe they are completely equitable and free of racial bias in their teaching practices. On the contrary, Starck et al. (2020) investigated several data sets where the results showed teachers differ only insignificantly in their prejudice when compared to non-teacher populations of adults. While educators believe themselves to be unbiased in the way they care for all of their students and want them to succeed, this is not enough. This evidence demonstrates how awareness alone cannot lead to unbiased behavior (Crowley, 2019). Rather, extra efforts must be made in order to combat both explicit and implicit bias in the classroom.

After examining historical and more recent racist practices within education, educators must take a critical look in the mirror to better understand the ways in which they perpetuate racist ideologies and practices in their school communities. In this section, essential terminology of bias will be defined before evidence of its prevalence is examined. White educators' biases often present themselves in a combination of the

manifestations of racism set forth in this section. Afterward, the reader will encounter

expert recommendations as to how educators can better understand their own implicit bias and manners in which they can actively work to renounce this bias.

Manifestations of Racism Through Bias

White Privilege and Whiteness. The term *White privilege* was coined by McIntosh (1990) and it refers to the advantages enjoyed by members of the White dominant group, by virtue of structural systems of power and at the expense of those marginalized by these same systems. *Whiteness* is an experience of privilege made to seem normal, justifying inequality of others through meritocracy. *Meritocracy* is the belief that success is solely achieved through efforts exerted toward achieving that success, therefore blaming lack of success achieved by marginalized groups on their lack of effort and ability (Martusewicz et al., 2021). Whiteness is a concept described by scholars as a relatively invisible one, at least to those experiencing its advantages (Crowley, 2019; Provost, 2021; Rogers & Mosley, 2006). The very experience of whiteness is seen as a structure designed to conceal its own existence. Crowley (2019) cautions that discussions around White privilege and whiteness often result in “anger, denial, avoidance, silence, color-blind discourses, [and] deficit discourses” (p. 1464). This very act of calling attention to the experience of White privilege and whiteness makes the invisible visible, which undermines the systems holding the experience of dominant power in place. This, in turn, causes a defensiveness related to maintaining White people’s position of power, even subconsciously.

White Fragility and White Guilt. DiAngelo (2018) describes *White fragility* as the natural reaction for White people to use highly emotional, argumentative, defensive,

silent, or fleeing tactics when they are faced with difficult conversations around race and racism. Sue (2015) provided an example of a White student becoming emotional when discussing racism in class, causing peers to focus on comforting her. This abruptly halted the discussion and effectively silenced the BIPOC students involved. Sue suggested White people feel a sense of *White guilt* because they “realize that they have lived lies of self-deception and that they do hold responsibility for the current oppression of BIPOC in the United States, whether through action or inaction” (p. 141). Rogers and Mosley (2006) described how White people often use forms of *White talk* in protective manners when confronted with feelings of White guilt. Some examples include using humor to lighten the mood of a conversation, using passive voice and distancing pronouns in order to remove oneself from accountability, as well as silencing or changing the subject to avoid the topic altogether. Crowley (2019) warns that while learning to productively discuss experiences of racism, care must be taken in order to prevent White perspectives from being recentered, while diminishing the experiences of BIPOC, as in Sue’s example scenario.

Racial Microaggressions. Sue (2015) defines *racial microaggressions* as “the everyday slights, insults, indignities, and invalidations” (p. 7) directed at BIPOC due to the visible characteristics of their race or ethnicity. Some examples of racial microaggressions could include mispronouncing a BIPOC’s name, demonstrating surprise toward BIPOC’s use of what may be considered White articulation, asking someone where they are “really” from, among many others (Martusewicz et al., 2021; Pearce, 2019). White people tend to overlook these instances of microaggression, unless

they are called to attention. Even then, White people fail to see the bigger picture seen by

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BIPOC as they experience multiple racial microaggressions throughout their daily lives. When microaggressions are called into question, White people often react with defensive strategies, such as denial of the perceived message, color-blindness, belittling the instance, accusing the BIPOC of being overly sensitive, or a combination of these reactions.

Color-Blindness. The concept of *color-blindness* is a common strategy, used often by the group in power, to deny seeing or acknowledging racial differences among people. Gillborn (2019) suggested that color blindness was born as a reaction to the perception that White people feel and have experienced being identified as racist when they make any mention of color. “Advocates of color-blindness often portray them selves as occupying the moral high ground—that is, as rising above petty racialized disputes in order to see the true worth of people and the arguments they make” (p. 113). Annamma et al. (2017) posited an updated term, *color-evasiveness*, which is intended to bring attention to the purposeful nature of denying the recognition of race in an effort to both eradicate racism and to protect one’s own reputation (Gillborn, 2019). Regardless of the intentions behind these mindsets, acting as if one does not see racial differences rejects the experiences of racism by BIPOC and sends the message that these differences and experiences are undeserving of any attention.

Recommendations for Bias Education

Contradictory to the assumption that teachers are naturally less biased by virtue of their

occupation, Starck et al. (2020) proposed that teachers require the same amount of guidance in rejecting their own biases as the rest of society. They believed this could be accomplished by “providing systematic education and training to reduce racial bias” (p.

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281). Furthermore, these authors acknowledged that teachers make numerous decisions throughout each and every day, but they argued educator training should equip teachers with strategies to stop and consider alternative perspectives and responses. These strategies aim to prevent perpetuating color-blind discourses, unchecked White privilege, and racial microaggressions (Crowley, 2019; Pearce, 2019; Provost, 2021; Starck et al., 2020). The following subsections present several expert recommended pedagogies for ongoing professional development which intend to address and counteract the effects of educator bias.

Sociological Imagination. While research indicates discussions of racism focused on White privilege can evoke high emotional responses from White participants (Crowley, 2019; Sue, 2015), studies seek to uncover alternative methods for more open-minded discussions of race and racism with White educators. Through a “White racial identity development” method (Crowley, 2019, p. 1465), educators are tasked with making the invisible visible. This process involves exploring the complex nature of White racial identities, while simultaneously focusing on possibilities and the never ending process of striving toward deracialized pedagogies and cultural competence. This method requires subjects who are open to the critical nature of self-discovery necessary for this work. Crowley connects Mill’s (1959) concept of “sociological imagination” to his work as a habit of mind that can guide educators to reflect upon their lived experience within the

context of societal and historical structures. Crowley used one-to-one interviews to help participants share and acknowledge their racial autobiographies. He asked about the communities in which they grew up, the experiences they had with BIPOC throughout their lives, and events that made them consider their own racial

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identities. This researcher noted how, with guidance, educators could learn to reflect on their experiences, not from a standpoint of individual efforts, but from a perspective of acknowledging the structural advantages from which they benefit.

Race Reflective Journaling. Milner (2003) advocated for the use of reflective journaling to guide educators in developing understanding of their own racial bias, the cultural contexts in which they interact with others, and the ways their experiences reflect systems of racism in today's society. Milner recognized this strategy may not come naturally or easily to some participants and requires guidance both in purpose and process. To support this work, he provided some sample questions through which teachers could begin their journey of race reflective discovery:

- How will my race influence my work as a teacher with students of color? ●
How might my students' racial experiences influence their work with me as the teacher?
- What is the impact of race on my beliefs?
- How do I, as a teacher, situate myself in the education of others, and how do I negotiate the power structures around race in my class to allow students to feel a sense of worth?

- How might racial influences impact my and my students' interests in the classroom? How might I connect lessons to those interests?
- To what degree are my role as teacher and my experiences superior to the experiences of my students, and is there knowledge to be learned from my constituents?

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- How do I situate and negotiate my students' knowledge, experience, expertise, and race with my own?
- Am I willing to speak about race on behalf of those who might not be present in the conversation *both* inside and outside of school, and am I willing to express the injustices of racism in conservative spaces? (p. 178)

Crowley (2019) supported the use of Milner's race reflective journaling in connection with his use of sociological imagination. As educators reflect on the structures of power and racism within their own experiences, journaling can be an effective alternative when one-to-one interview formats are often not convenient in teacher education environments.

Microaggression Interruption Strategies. Pearce (2019) found that White people and BIPOC alike struggled to name acts of racial microaggression as acts of racism. Both groups felt unequipped to deal with these acts when they were witnessed. Pearce offered a three-step process for interrupting acts of microaggression, but it is certainly a process that requires practice at each step. In order to bring attention to microaggressions and grasp their ramifications, one must (1) explicitly identify the occurrence of the microaggression; (2) examine the effects of the microaggression upon

the victims, aggressor, and bystanders; and (3) analyze the responses to the occurrence.

This provides an excellent step for all educators to transform awareness into action. After naming and analyzing effects of a microaggression witnessed, educators can try out a variety of responses in a safe and brave space, centered around learning how to better react to instances of microaggression among colleagues and in the classroom.

Some potential responses for interrupting the microaggression include asking the speaker to more explicitly describe what they mean, clarify by repeating their message

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back to them, or more explicitly describing the message that was conveyed to the audience. This can be an intimidating practice and could certainly lead to defensiveness from the speaker, but it is an option to bring the conversation out in the open instead of ignoring and remaining complicit in the event of a microaggression. *Summary of*

Understanding One's Own Bias

In this section, readers gained a deeper appreciation for the roles White privilege, whiteness, White fragility, White guilt, racial microaggressions, and color-blind discourses play in the persistence of White educators' implicit biases and their effects on students. Expert recommendations were provided to equip educators with devices they can use to begin and persevere through the ongoing process of self-reflection and interruption of one's own bias. These strategies and essential understandings can contribute to educators feeling more prepared and competent when facilitating tricky discussions about race and racism.

Developmental Readiness

The next step in the process, after analyzing one's own bias and minimizing its

influence in the classroom, is to begin planning these discussions of race and racism in age-appropriate approaches. Preparing for these emotion-inducing conversations can make educators wonder whether their young students are ready to handle these topics at all. In fact, Sullivan et al. (2021) conducted a number of studies which concluded that adults' willingness to talk with children about race is strongly tied to their perceptions of children's ability to understand the concept of race. Yet, these perceptions were often misjudged by about four and a half years when compared to available literature on developmental readiness. These authors discovered that adults tend to avoid

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conversations about race and racism for a significant amount of time while children are processing ideas of race without support (Copenhaver-Johnson, 2006). In this section, I have synthesized the literature examining children's developmental readiness for processing concepts of race and racism, in order to help educators see that they can appropriately have these conversations earlier than they may have previously thought. Furthermore, I investigated the ramifications that result when adults avoid discussions of race and racism with children during opportune stages of their discovery about the world in which they live.

Child Psychology and Racial Awareness

Children develop understandings of racial differences and racially influenced social dynamics throughout their early and middle childhood stages, at varying rates and in growingly more complex capacities as they develop and experience more of the world around them. Steele et al. (2018) hypothesized that implicit biases develop rapidly in children from an early age, but those biases are continuously contested or reinforced

through a slower moving system during their middle childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Children are constantly making sense of their observable world, which is quite small at first and grows significantly through experiences interacting with more diverse people, enacting racial preference in playmates, and witnessing prejudicial beliefs and stereotypes through peer and adult influence.

Categorization by Race. Kemple et al. (2016) described how infants begin to recognize physical differences they see between themselves and others in their observable world. By toddler age, children begin vocalizing and showing curiosity about these observable differences. Before facial features and hair texture, often the first of these

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physical differences is skin color, given that it is “humans’ largest and most readily observable organ” (p. 98). Even before vocalization, evidence has shown indications of racial awareness based on skin color beginning at six months old (Cristol & Gimbert, 2008; Katz, 2003). Interestingly, Katz (2003) found that Black infants were more likely to make physical distinctions based on skin color, while White infants tended to react based on physical distinctions of gender at this age. While these findings were measured through nonverbal cues like length of time looking at photographs, more verbal and tactile methods could be used in later stages of development. When tasked with sorting dolls and pictures, children up to the age of six were more likely to categorize objects by a single dimension of difference, like skin color. By the early elementary years, children began classifying objects according to multiple sets of similarities and differences, not confined to race (Cristol & Gimbert, 2008). This racial awareness in classifying inanimate objects plays out in real-life through children’s choice in playmates.

In-Group and Out-Group Preference. Evidence in early childhood studies certainly demonstrates a favoritism toward one's *in-group* (racially similar peers) when compared to their *out-group* (racially dissimilar peers) (Cristol & Gimbert, 2008; Pica-Smith, 2009; Steele et al., 2018). Toward the end of the toddler stage of development, Katz (2003) noticed a dramatic shift in in-group versus out-group preference. At two-and-a-half years old, Black children were more likely to choose same race friends, while White children showed less race-related selection of friends. However, at three years old, nearly 90% of White children chose White playmates, while only one third of Black children chose another Black child to play with.

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Many studies compare in-group to out-group preferences, but Steele et al. (2018) aimed to discover children's preference when presented with the choice between only out-group options. The results of two studies found that both Asian children in Canada (those with more exposure to White peers) and Asian children in Brunei (those with less exposure to White peers) were more likely to demonstrate pro-White bias than pro-Black bias reflected in their preference between the two out-groups. Interestingly, the younger children's pro-White bias was far more pronounced than older children's bias in this study. The authors claim this could be attributed to increased opportunities to connect with Black members of their community over time, or to their own growing racial identity as a minority, which may cause them to develop feelings of comradery with fellow minority out-group members even when they belong to differing minority groups.

Self Concept and Self Esteem. As children develop ways of categorizing others, they likewise conceptualize ways of classifying themselves within their world. Kemple et

al. (2016) contrasted self-concept from self-esteem, in that *self-concept* involves strictly observable traits (e.g. I am a girl; My skin is dark; I read books), while *self-esteem* relates feelings to those observable traits (e.g. I am a girl and I like that; My skin is dark and that is not pretty; I read books and that is good). In early childhood, children begin to develop self concept, which then becomes more complex and morphs into the development of self-esteem. The positive and negative feelings associated with a child's self-esteem are largely influenced by messages received from the people and media they are in contact with. It is essential that all caregivers provide as many positive messages of self image to children, even in their early childhood years.

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Racial Prejudice and Stereotyping. The general consensus among scholars in child psychology and education is that children are capable of beginning to engage in conversations around race at the age of three or four (Copenhaver-Johnson, 2006; Cristol & Gimbert, 2008; Sullivan et al., 2021; Yamauchi et al., 1998). Research indicates children at this age have begun to show knowledge of stereotypes and prejudicial beliefs, but that their conscious awareness of their own bias will not develop until later in their childhood (Bigler & Wright, 2014). Cristol and Gimbert (2008) describe initial stereotyping for children as the way they react with bias towards people who may look different or behave in unfamiliar ways. "This does not indicate that the child is or will remain prejudiced, but the child is learning the acceptable and not acceptable social norms" (p. 206).

Several studies sought to understand children's perceptions of the lack of diversity in U.S. presidents prior to Barack Obama's election. In their discussion connecting these

studies, Bigler and Wright (2014) noted how most of the five to ten-year-old children identified the lack of diversity and explained the reasoning as being related to common stereotypes about the level of intelligence and leadership skills held by certain racial and gender groups. Younger children's explanations demonstrated a belief that these stereotypes and prejudices were ultimately true (e.g. "Men *are* smarter than women"). A portion of the older children, however, represented an ability to articulate the systemic influence in perpetuating stereotypes and prejudice while also distancing themselves from these ideas (e.g. "Some people think White people are better leaders").

Through studies conducted by Cristol and Gimbert (2008) as well as Steele et al. (2018), similar trends were discovered when analyzing changing levels of bias according

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to results from Implicit Association Tests (IATs) at different ages through childhood and in adulthood. These tests seek to assess people's implicit bias while analyzing their instinctive reactions when associating positive and negative words with photos of people with differing racial and ethnic physical characteristics. A common pattern was found indicating an unchanging level of implicit bias from childhood to adulthood. In contrast, when participants were evaluated for explicit bias, a significant decrease was found to occur between the early and late elementary years, with the lower explicit bias detected later in elementary years, and then remaining consistently lower into adulthood. Steele and colleagues acknowledge the latter trend could correlate with a number of factors at play as children progress through their elementary years, including building relationships with more members of BIPOC communities over time, learning about positive

contributions of BIPOC in history and their communities, the increased likelihood that adults are willing to discuss topics of race with them as they get older (Sullivan et al., 2021), or a multitude of other possibilities.

Age Appropriate Misconceptions. As with any discussions with children, it is natural for young learners to make errors based on their developing understanding, but it is important to remember this does not indicate an inability to learn or understand (Rogers & Mosley, 2006). These misconceptions can be reconstructed and clarified through the use of modeling and guided practice. One common misconception can involve young children's lower ability to conceptualize time, as in believing segregation is a matter of ancient history (Rogers & Mosley, 2006) or assuming their current teacher played a role in the initial genocide of Indigenous Peoples (Bigler & Wright, 2014). Another misconception involves children using linguistic markers of distancing like using

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“they” and “them” to refer to Black people signaling an interpretation of the group as separate and other (Copenhaver-Johnson, 2006; Rogers & Mosley, 2006). Other misconceptions can seem even more disconnected, such as believing that drinking too much chocolate milk changes your skin color, or there is no such thing as a Black Santa (Summer, 2014). While these misconceptions can present educators with the challenge of expressing concepts more accurately and concretely for better understanding, exploring counter narratives for children's misconceptions can be a valuable way to begin a discussion about race and interrupt their prejudiced thinking.

Impacts of Discussing Race with Children

Many researchers acknowledge the role teachers play in providing interventions to

reduce prejudice and bias in children throughout their stages of racial awareness development (Bigler & Wright, 2014; Paluck & Green, 2009; Rogers & Mosley, 2006), with several insisting that earlier is better (Copenhaver-Johnson, 2006; Kemple et al., 2016; Pica-Smith, 2009). Studies have found that race and racism are challenging subjects to discuss even between adults. This can be attributed to the way race talk violates societal rules of politeness, academia, and color-blindness (Sue, 2015). BIPOC simultaneously grapple with whether to speak their honest truth in experience, or remain silent to avoid being perceived as combative by their White peers (Pearce, 2019; Sue, 2015). Supporters of early race discussions attribute these experiences to the effect of years of silenced race talk in education. Perhaps if educators guided students in becoming more comfortable having respectful discussions of race at an earlier age, these discussions would not seem so intimidating later in life. Meanwhile, a critical perspective

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must call into question both the potential risks and reported benefits of beginning these discussions of race and racism with early elementary students.

Effects of Teacher Silence. In an interview (Richardson, 2017), author Beverly Daniel Tatum suggested that silence on the topic of race can lead to other people and forces (peers, media, racist ideologies) filling in a child's gaps in knowledge, which can have negative and harmful outcomes. Color-blindness, discussed earlier in this chapter, is one protective strategy educators often use to avoid discussing race with students (Thomas, 2020). According to Copenhaver-Johnson (2006), claiming not to see color only deepens the divide between races, while having those discussions promotes the focus on commonalities shared between human beings. In addition to validating racial

divides in the eyes of White students, this author insists “one of the many dire consequences of adult denial is that young children of color tend to bear the burdens of racism without acknowledgement and support from their caregivers” (p. 14).

When educators lack the skills to address and reject their own bias and manifestations of White fragility, they often linger in a state of discomfort about having discussions of race with children. Kemple et al. (2016) stressed that when adults have flustered, rushed, or nonexistent responses to children’s natural curiosities about differences between people, this sends a message that racial differences are not to be discussed, and further connects negative connotations with these racial differences themselves (Copenhaver-Johnson, 2006; Pica-Smith, 2009; Yamauchi et al., 1998). This evidence further supports the importance of educators' self-reflective work to better understand their own implicit bias before sharing messages about race with children in their care (Kemple et al., 2016). While these and other proponents of childhood

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discussions about race warn of the adverse effects of silence, critics warn of the potential risks these conversations may pose to young minds.

Potential Risks. Bigler and Wright (2014) discovered four main risks in discussing race and racism with elementary students. First, studies have found that negative feelings can result from lessons involving examples of discrimination (Hughes et al. 2007), even minor examples like teasing and exclusion. However, these findings discovered that feelings of guilt and defensiveness maintained low levels, and these lessons did not cause anger from Black students directed toward White students. Second, the authors warned of the possible risk of *stereotype threats*, which are described as the

way people avoid acting a certain way in order to minimize their risk of being stereotyped. Research has shown this phenomenon is only minimally evident in studies with children, and it can be counteracted through pre-teaching strategies. Third, they offered the risk of *out-group mistrust*, in which people tend to distrust members of different races after becoming more aware of bias between racial groups. Finally, Bigler and Wright warn of the possibility that children's perceptions of racial bias, discrimination, prejudice, and stereotyping may become reinforced rather than counteracted. The authors suggest that if lessons involve interactive pedagogies and, "are explicit in their critique of the beliefs and social systems that support inequality, [this] should reduce children's social stereotyping and prejudice" (p. 20). Research for these possible risks is sparse, and evidence for some of these possible risks were based upon studies only involving adults. So, further studies would be required to more fully understand these implications and to discover how these risks may impact children specifically.

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Reported Benefits. Bigler and Wright (2014) exemplified taking a critical perspective by analyzing both the risks and the benefits of engaging in race discussions with children. Some benefits they offered, based on their studies on bias-knowledgeable children, include: (a) their tendency to recognize more positive attributes toward people from marginalized groups than their less bias-aware peers; (b) their development of skills and strategies to identify and reject acts of discrimination witnessed around them; and (c) increased self-esteem and rejection of the internalization of discrimination, prejudice, and stereotyping. In a study conducted with participants age six through eleven, Hughes et al.

(2007) evaluated impacts resulting from history lessons either explicitly addressing discrimination or those that avoided explicit reference to discrimination. Evidence from their study indicated that White children who received lessons explicitly discussing discrimination held more positive racial attitudes toward Black people than their White peers who participated in lessons glossing over discriminatory practices in history. Black students in both control groups increased both their positive and negative racial attitudes toward White people, which the authors attribute to learning about both positive and negative ramifications of White people's actions throughout history. While this study did signal evidence of a risk of invoking feelings of defensiveness and White guilt for some White participants, feelings of White guilt by young adults have been found to promote more acceptance and understanding of racial differences. The authors propose similar effects could result from similar learning opportunities with children, but more research is required to ascertain the validity of this inference.

In their review of research conducted in the 21st Century, Paluck and Green (2009) found several prejudice-reducing interventions that have shown promising

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evidence through field research. Cooperative learning structures, in which children teach and learn from one another, have demonstrated consistently positive outcomes, including relationship building across the confines of racial and ethnic differences and interrupting inaccurate stereotypes around race-related intelligence and ability. Another research-based intervention was the use of teacher-led discussion. These authors emphasize that peer influence can impact misconceptions, so the guidance of an adult is crucial in these discussions. A third intervention named by Paluck and Green was in the

category of entertainment, but they later specified a subset of this intervention involving the use of books specifically. It turns out, the majority of studies found evidence affirming the positive effects of this intervention. The authors found the use of multicultural children's literature to be a beneficial prejudice-reducing intervention, especially those depicting BIPOC characters and experiences, as well as those which highlighted positive interactions between people of differing races, ethnicities, and backgrounds. Related research will be discussed further in the next section, which focuses on the use of literacy in discussions of race and racism.

Summary of Developmental Readiness

It is well documented that adults have inaccurate estimations of children's developmental readiness to discuss concepts of race and racism. Adults then postpone providing guidance through open communication during the critical years when children are quickly and independently making sense of their natural development of racial awareness, mixed with their observations of societal messages about racial stereotypes and prejudice. This section has provided readers with evidence of early elementary students' developmental readiness to participate in conversations focused on race and

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racism. A critical perspective explored the risks of these early conversations, but ultimately found methods for counteracting these risks and found wider scopes of research revealing evidence of the many benefits associated with discussing race and racism at early ages. In the fourth section, the use of literacy will be explored for its purpose in reducing lingering challenges faced by educators in their conversations about race with early elementary students.

Utilizing Literacy

Once educators can see the impacts of historical and contemporary racism on the education system, gain awareness of their own bias, and more accurately understand children's developmental readiness for discussions of race and racism, the discussion shifts into the "how" of it all. In this fourth section of the chapter, I will define and describe four main components of literacy instruction that provide excellent opportunities for supporting concepts of race and racism as well as promoting equity and empathy in classroom environments. These four components include: critical literacy pedagogy, text selection, inclusive classroom libraries, and interactive read alouds.

Critical Literacy

Critical literacy pedagogies can be traced back to Freire's (1970) concepts of liberating the oppressed through pedagogies surrounding the critical questioning of the forces causing oppression and the transformative action aiming to reconstruct those forces. McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004) expanded upon Freire's concepts to establish four principles of critical literacy:

1. Critical literacy focuses on issues of power and promotes reflection, transformation, and action
2. Critical literacy focuses on the problem and its complexity
3. Critical literacy strategies are dynamic and adapt to the contexts in which they are used
4. Critical literacy disrupts the commonplace by examining it from multiple

perspectives. (pp. 14-16)

Many authors connect critical literacy pedagogies to a variety of literacy practices used in today's classrooms (Lazar & Rachko, 2012; Rogers & Mosley, 2006; Thomas, 2020). In a study conducted by Rogers & Mosley (2006), second graders learning through critical literacy pedagogies were able to name race when it was not explicitly named in the text, to question inconsistencies between text and illustrations, and to recognize injustices within the narratives they analyzed. While this study left room for growth on the teacher's part, other research has explored the benefits of specific training in critical literacy pedagogy through teacher education programs.

Lazar and Rachko (2012) found significant improvements in teachers' depth of questioning in relation to racism after completing their preparation course. Teachers who received training in their critical literacy pedagogy course felt more prepared to dive into the challenging discussion of race with their students. These educators created and asked questions targeting ideas of racial power dynamics, building connections between historical and contemporary forms of segregation, the roles of White people as either BIPOC allies or enemies, as well as interrogating what it takes to challenge structural racism and become an activist for social justice. Without explicit critical literacy instruction, control group teachers were more likely to ask personal reaction or problem

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and solution questions when using the same texts. They also tended to focus on non-controversial themes like friendship, while sidestepping the subject of racism. Rogers and Mosley (2006) described how racism continues to be alive and well, hidden within everyday conversations and perpetuated through a wide variety of print and digital media.

Critical literacy pedagogy benefits students in preparing them to identify this racism found in the talk and texts surrounding them, as well as in providing essential skills in order to liberate themselves and others from the authoritative forces perpetuating this oppression. Critical literacy instruction guides students to see and understand the systems of oppression they encounter everyday, helps them develop critical thinking skills, exposes them to varied perspectives, and cultivates a passion for taking action against social injustices. After tackling critical ideas of racism and oppression within texts, students can learn skills for taking transformative action against injustices through post-reading extension activities. Some examples of these activities include creating a class book to share ideas, designing posters to promote activism, engaging in self-reflective journaling, or acting out scenarios from the text to explore alternative responses or solutions (Kaczmarczyk et al., 2019). While much of the work of critical literacy pedagogy is carried out in the minds and conversations of students, the task of selecting the right text lies in the hands of the teacher.

Text Selection

Purposeful text selection can build BIPOC students' self image and connections to learning, while also guiding White students to see their peers as valuable and as equals (Copenhaver-Johnson, 2006; Thomas, 2020). The task of carefully selecting texts is not an easy one and involves many aspects of critical literacy on the educator's part.

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Research agrees it is essential to evaluate the completeness (Rogers & Mosley, 2006) and accuracy of historical information presented within texts. Lazar and Rachko (2012) believed educators dedicated to the work of critical literacy must devote considerable

time and effort to inspect their text selections, focusing especially on, “how story characters either preserve or challenge racist structures, how institutions preserve or challenge racism through their policies and practices, and how authors and or illustrators convey and or exclude messages about racism in their texts” (p. 15).

To provide a starting point for carrying out such evaluations, Mankiw and Strasser (2013) presented a set of questions educators must ask when evaluating books to be used when discussing the “tender” topic of racism:

- Do the illustrations or story lines depict stereotypes, such as particular ethnicities living in poverty or disabled characters who succeed only with the help of nondisabled characters?
- Is the author knowledgeable about the topic from personal experience or vocation?
- Are problems solved realistically? Is there room in the story for more than one solution? Is it possible for children to figure out how they would approach the problem?
- Does the writing style encourage discussions?
- What kind of language does the author use to describe the characters? For example, are people with special needs pitied and described primarily as helpless?
- Is the story developmentally appropriate and interesting? Are the illustrations eye-catching?
- Is the text written for young children's understanding? (p. 86)

In addition to the questions presented by Mankiw and Strasser, teachers’ text selection

considerations must be made in regards to the multicultural makeup of their classrooms (Thomas, 2020).

Inclusive Classroom Libraries

As any educator will confirm, due to lack of funding and a sense of responsibility to spend their own money on books, most classroom libraries are full of books decades old, from garage sales, thrift stores, used library book give-aways, and hand-me-downs. The statistical probability of these books being proportionately representative of the students who are learning in these classrooms is unlikely. In 2019, the proportion of books published in the U.S. featuring White protagonists was 41%, while the next highest category, at 29%, featured non-human protagonists, such as animals, vehicles, and toys (Cooperative Children's Book Center, 2021). All other non-White, human protagonists made up only a combined 36% of books published, while the United States Census Bureau (2019) reported a combined 42% of the population identifying with at least one race other than White. This indicates a significant disproportionality between demographics of protagonists in texts and the demographics of U.S. classroom populations. Not to mention, the likelihood of misrepresentation is far more significant when considering the demographics of texts published prior to 2019, which are more likely to occupy teachers' bookshelves.

When self-selecting texts, research shows elementary students are more likely to choose books based on their racial likeness to the main character represented (Hardy et al., 2020). This evidence indicates it is even more important for educators to take a critical look at their libraries and make concerted efforts to ensure proportionate

representation within their collection, in order for their students to see themselves reflected in the pages of the books they choose to read. Booksource (n.d.) has developed a comprehensive checklist to support educators in evaluating texts to remove from or add to their inclusive classroom libraries. This checklist can be used similarly while selecting a variety of inclusive texts to be read aloud with large or small groups of students.

Interactive Read Alouds

While the intent of providing access to texts depicting a variety of representation in characters and perspectives is a positive one, it is not enough to just provide texts dealing with race if educators do not lean in to the significant themes of these stories (Rogers & Mosley, 2006). Gardner (2017) affirms that students are not able to independently identify the systemic ways racism is ingrained in texts, in their own responses and behaviors, and in society at large. Meaningful discussions using the framework of critical literacies must accompany the use of these texts. Therefore, researchers propose that the use of texts in shared and interactive read alouds, along with critical literacy pedagogies, provide students with opportunities to interact with the text, make meaning through guided discussion, and begin to gain new or deeper understandings of race and racism (Kaczmarczyk et al., 2019; Kemple et al., 2016; Lazar & Rachko, 2012; Rogers & Mosley, 2006). Copenhaver-Johnson (2006) emphasized that reading literature that incorporates BIPOC characters (not only those affiliated with Black History) allows students to connect across racial lines, with both the negative and positive lived experiences they have in common with these characters and with their peers. This builds a more connected classroom community and an openness for discussing race in a

Gardner (2017) recognized that as children explore facets of critical thinking and discover concepts of racism, the experimental verbalization of their ponderings will likely materialize in uncomfortable and tactless forms. As Copenhaver-Johnson (2006) stated, “inquiry about race rarely comes neatly packaged and manageable; [teachers must learn] to become comfortable confronting the unexpected” (p. 19). Lazar and Rachko (2012) found that certain factors can affect educators’ feelings of comfort and development of competence in facilitating discussions about racism. These factors include: an awareness of the impacts of racism in historical and contemporary society, an awareness of cultural, racial and ethnic diversity, an understanding of instructional pedagogy for children at different developmental stages, and a repertoire of knowledge in available children’s literature involving multicultural themes. A wealth of evidence has been reviewed in the preceding sections which confirms the need for addressing all of these factors. ***Summary of Utilizing Literacy***

This section has explored the definition of critical literacy pedagogy and the ways in which this instructional model relates to text selection, inclusive classroom libraries, and interactive read aloud lessons. Literacy instruction provides an excellent gateway into helping young children begin to understand race and racism through meaningful conversations. Additionally, the purposeful selection and use of texts can help students build positive concepts about their identity, their abilities, and value of themselves and their peers (Hardy et al., 2020; Kemple et al., 2016).

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I examined an array of literature connected to my research question:

How can White educators utilize literacy to more confidently and competently

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discuss race and racism with their early elementary students? Experts agree that educators must be knowledgeable on the progression of racism throughout history and contemporary society in order to firmly grasp the deep roots of racism that have already and will continue to impact their bias. Educators must not only become aware of their own bias, but they must also make concerted efforts to interrupt and dismantle these biases in the way they impact their students, schools, and communities. Once these biases are being actively and continuously disrupted, and once educators realize children's developmental capability for conceptualizing ideas surrounding race and racism, they will begin to gain confidence and competence for stimulating conversations with their students focused on these pivotal topics. The use of literacy instruction has proven to be a phenomenal mechanism for initiating and supporting these valuable conversations.

The use of literacy methods explained in this chapter has served as a springboard for the project portion of this Capstone. My project, which is described in greater detail in Chapter Three, will take the form of a professional development course designed around the research findings laid out within this chapter. This learning opportunity aspires to prepare White educators to feel more confident and competent in guiding discussions of race and racism in their classroom. Finally, Chapter Four provides a conclusion for the paper, analyzing the effects of my project on my own learning, as well as implications of this project within the field of education.

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CHAPTER THREE

Project Description

Overview

Throughout my career in education, I have often heard rhetoric surrounding the increasing diversity of our students and our duty as educators to support this diversity and help all students grow and learn. The reality is, this narrative is often utterly surface level and it gives educators no guidance for how exactly to accomplish this goal. As my research in Chapter Two has shown, educators, especially White educators, have a significant amount of inward learning to venture into before they can truly guide their diverse students' success in learning. For this reason, I have created a highly self-reflective professional learning opportunity which aims to answer the research question: *How can White educators utilize literacy to more confidently and competently discuss race and racism with their early elementary students?*

In the following chapter, the reader will find an overview of the project I planned in connection with this Capstone paper. This elective professional development course targets educators' desire to better understand their own bias in order to gain the confidence and competence referenced in my research question. This professional development course also features a special focus on the use of literacy to support teachers in facilitating conversations on race and racism even with early elementary students. I consulted research based practices for effective adult learning to rationalize the structure of these professional development sessions. While the planning of this project was completed during the Capstone writing process, the implementation of the professional

development course will take place sometime in the future. The reader will gain a picture

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of the setting and audience envisioned for this project, as well as its timeline for development. I will address assessments for reflection and improvement over time, and finally, I will wrap up the main ideas of this chapter before introducing Chapter Four.

Project Description

Through the process of researching how educators can become better prepared for conversations of race and racism with their students, it became increasingly clear how a foundation of deep personal examination was a necessary first step. For this reason, I chose to complete my project in the form of a professional development opportunity so that educators could engage in meaningful conversations with colleagues surrounding racism in education, deep self-reflection into one's own bias, and an exchange of ideas surrounding the use of literacy to guide challenging discussions of race and racism with students. In order to cover these topics in sufficient depth and with adequate relationship building for vulnerable reflection and discussion, this professional learning opportunity was designed to take place through the course of five bi-weekly sessions, lasting 90 minutes each.

Throughout the course, entitled *Looking In to Speak Up*, educators set out to learn from their own experiences as well as the experiences of others to better understand the role bias plays in their own classrooms as well as the education system as a whole. Participants engage in a variety of self-reflective activities and collaborative learning opportunities. The main topics covered in the sessions include gaining a better understanding of contemporary racism and one's own bias, learning ways to interrupt and

reconstruct these biases, and how to utilize the wealth of resources found within the field of literacy to address the topic of race and racism within the early elementary classroom.

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Session One: Racism and Bias in Education

The learning objectives of the first session include the following: (1) Learners will recognize the role racism continues to play in today's educational system; and (2) Learners will synthesize several examples of implicit bias in today's educational system. A major goal of the first session is relationship and trust building amongst participants, which is imperative for the vulnerability required throughout the course. The remainder of the session sets forth to help educators gain a better understanding of how racism in education has changed throughout history and remains persistent to this day. Different types of bias are analyzed through reading, viewing, and collaborating to synthesize these materials that seek to dig deeper into and question societal bias and deeply ingrained racism. As a follow up activity, participants are asked to complete a set of modules to learn more about implicit bias in education prior to the next session. ***Session Two:***

Deconstructing Bias

The second session's learning objectives are (1) Learners will examine the biases they hold through self-reflective activities and sharing personal experiences; and (2) Learners will make connections between their own experiences with bias and learn strategies for interrupting and deconstructing future instances of bias. Implicit Association Tests (IATs) and racial microaggression interruption activities allow participants to make connections between personal bias and research based strategies for bias interruption in a tangible manner.

The session's follow up activity invites independent self-reflection based on Milner's (2003) race reflective journaling. These reflections will be used to review and expand upon concepts of teacher bias and power in the next session. The work of

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self-reflection into White privilege and bias is emotionally taxing and it is important to remember and acknowledge that educators will likely be feeling a mixture of discomfort, anger, fear, frustration, or avoidance as they think about learning to deconstruct their own biases and disrupt bias that they witness in their world. It will be important for participants to remember that often this discomfort means something is moving and changing in their perception, and this is the ultimate goal.

Session Three: Exploring Critical Literacy

The learning objectives for the third day of the professional development include: (1) Learners will reflect upon and analyze the ways their own biases affect their students and learning environment; and (2) Learners will develop a new or deeper understanding of critical literacy pedagogy, and apply this pedagogy to texts they already use in their classrooms. This session provides an introduction to critical literacy pedagogy, a look into the benefits of this pedagogy for both students and educators, and examples of its implementation. The application of these skills allows participants to connect the previous work of bias awareness and teacher power to the texts they choose, the way in which they interact with texts, and the ways in which they guide students to interact with texts. The independent task following this session asks educators to identify text used in their classroom, contemplate it through a critical lens, and select a supplemental or alternative text while applying critical literacy skills.

Session Four: Diversify Your Collection

The fourth session aims to achieve the following objectives: (1) Learners will gain tools to intentionally improve literary representation of BIPOC students in their classroom libraries; (2) Learners will collaborate and use critical literacy skills to curate a

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list of literary materials with the intentional purpose of filling representational gaps; and (3) Learners will evaluate the contents of their own classroom libraries and learn how to fund newly acquired texts in their libraries. Throughout this session, participants will accumulate a wealth of knowledge and resources to better represent their students within their classroom libraries. Educators will collaborate and apply critical literacy skills to create wish lists of books which can be shared with colleagues as well as potential supporters of diversifying and expanding classroom libraries. Following this session, participants are tasked with evaluating their own classroom libraries to discover representative gaps to be filled, with the assistance of the *Inclusive Classroom Library Checklist* (Booksource, n.d.).

Session Five: Being Brave

In the final session, the learning objectives include: (1) Learners will synthesize concepts taught throughout the course to build confidence in discussing race and racism with early elementary learners; (2) Learners will apply critical literacy skills to develop deeper and more explicit race-related questioning during interactive read alouds; and (3) Learners will develop a collaborative and supportive community of ongoing resource and idea sharing. The session emphasizes the importance of being brave in the face of discussing race and racism; grasping that trying and making a mistake is far less harmful

than staying silent. Educators will practice developing and sharing deep, but age-appropriate, questions related to concepts of race and racism while interacting with a variety of literary resources. At the end of the session, participants will be invited to join an online community where the resource and idea sharing can continue beyond the professional development setting.

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Summary of Session Content

Educators who choose to engage in this professional development opportunity can embark on a challenging, but rewarding, journey of societal and self discovery in order to better support their diverse learners. Throughout this learning opportunity educators are given the chance to dig deep within their personal experiences to identify the bias they hold, as well as gain strategies and skills to begin dismantling the hold those biases have on their behaviors and decisions, especially when it comes to their students. Educators can build a stronger sense of confidence and competence through self-reflection and collaborative learning to feel better prepared to discuss race and racism when it naturally or intentionally comes up in the classroom. Participants depart with a collection of tools and resources for facilitating these challenging discussions with their young elementary students, as well as access to a community resource for discovering and sharing new ideas and understandings along this continuous journey of growth.

Research Rationale

While Chapter Two addressed several aspects of adult learning, I focus here on a few additional points that were instrumental to the creation of my project. When considering the structure of a professional development opportunity in general, there are

a few key factors that Shearer et al. (2019) recommend. These authors suggest effective professional learning experiences should address the following adult learning needs, especially when working with educators:

- Teachers want to know how learning a new concept or instructional method will impact their students.

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- Teachers' instructional knowledge and experience must serve as a foundation for new pedagogical knowledge.
- Teachers want to make their own decisions as they learn and apply new materials and approaches, and this can be facilitated through professional learning.
- Teachers want to learn that which they can apply immediately in their own classrooms with their own students.
- Teachers respond best to that which leads to positive changes in their students.
- Teachers will gain deeper understandings of instructional applications that address their own questions within inquiry-based, dynamic approaches to professional learning. (pp. 282-283)

Given these recommendations, my project involves making the task of self-reflection relevant to the way it impacts participants' students and it allows participants to make the learning their own with lots of choice in how to engage with materials. Within the self-reflective activities, personal experience certainly will act as a foundation for new learning. It is critical to realize that this foundation may need to crumble in order to be rebuilt, but this is natural in this process of bias awareness and deconstruction. Through the collaborative learning environment of this professional learning course, educators are

able to explore ideas and methods with like-minded professionals, while sharing differing experiences and perspectives. Finally, assessment of perceived value and opportunities for participant feedback are instrumental in ensuring that these sessions truly have positive effects on students' learning.

Another essential aspect of adult learning ties back to Lazar and Rachko's (2012) research discussed in Chapter Two. Their study found that teachers' comfort and depth of

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questioning in relation to racism significantly increased after educators completed their critical literacy pedagogy course. Several methods were highlighted for the effectiveness for guiding teachers in developing more competent and lasting skills in the implementation of critical literacy pedagogies. These learning opportunities included studying literature on racism, analyzing visual media, acting out scenarios, collecting and analyzing ethnographic data, and completing autobiographical and biographical written assignments analyzing one's own racial bias as well as the bias of others. These learning activities will all be incorporated within my project, in hopes of similarly preparing teachers to dig into more meaningful questions and discussions of race and racism with their own young learners.

Setting and Audience

After analyzing an extensive amount of research on how to go about understanding one's own bias, it became clear that in order to accomplish the goals of this professional development opportunity, it would require a significant amount of time and trust amongst participants. Therefore, the setting of this professional learning is designed

to place over a set of five bi-weekly sessions, each lasting 90 minutes. These sessions would take place during the months of September through November in order to provide experience in the classroom for completing reflective activities, as well as to allow time to implement new learnings within the school year and the specific context of students reflected upon throughout the course.

This optional learning experience would take place in a non-school setting, such as a community center or library. This would allow participants from different school settings to reflect on ideas of racism within the education system as a whole, rather than

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confined to the singular experiences of one school building. This non-school setting is also intended to provide a space where participants can feel safe and brave to speak candidly and be a vulnerable participant in the process. In order to feel comfortable opening up and becoming vulnerable when discussing tough, personal, and taboo topics, it is essential that participants choose to attend this learning experience of their own volition, rather than be required to attend. Dedication to the goals of this professional development are vital to the success of the learning experiences.

Participants from a variety of school settings are invited to sign up for the course to share differing experiences and perspectives. While this course is intended for educators who self-identify as White, any educator that works with students and wants to feel more equipped to discuss race in their classrooms will be welcome to join. Communications advertising this learning opportunity would acknowledge that there is a specific emphasis on dismantling the experience of the dominant culture and its accompanying bias, so participants should sign up based on understanding how the

course would be relevant to their own experiences and goals. The more diverse experiences that can be shared within the group, the more robust the learning opportunity can become. Additionally, while the focus of the White experience is a basis for reflection, BIPOC voices were incorporated throughout the creation of this project, through integration of BIPOC created materials. The course is designed to secure 10 to 20 attendees in order to create a sense of small group trust and community amongst participants without leaving members feeling like silent observers within a large group.

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Timeline

The idea for this project was actually sparked prior to my beginning the Capstone writing process. In my first Hamline University graduate course taken during the summer of 2020, I wrote a mini literature review focused on how to talk to kindergarteners about race. I ended up needing to drastically cut down on my writing due to the maximum page limit of the assignment, but my surplus of resources and ideas sparked my interest and desire to dig deeper into this topic. In August of 2021, I created a short professional development opportunity for another Hamline course which was intended to guide my colleagues in evaluating and revamping their classroom libraries to become more inclusive classroom libraries. I felt there was far too much to cover, and that this would fit more ideally within a whole learning unit. As I chose my topic for this Capstone and wrote my literature review in October 2021, my idea to embed that session within a lengthier professional development experience was solidified.

I wrote my initial plan for this project in November 2021, and then revised and completed the project itself in March 2022. As of the submission of this paper, the project

is a hypothetical one. So, my project involved designing the presentation and activities planned for the professional development course without yet carrying out the plan with real participants. However, I do hope to find an opportunity to make this plan a reality someday in the future. Chapter Four was written in April of 2022. Submission of this Capstone in its entirety and my graduation from Hamline's Masters of Arts in Literacy Education (MALEd) program take place in May 2022.

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Assessment

As mentioned in the Research Rationale section of this chapter, evidence shows educators engage more actively with professional development opportunities that feel relevant to themselves and their students, and those which have positive impacts on their students. Therefore, assessments of this learning opportunity are focused on those outcomes. After each session of the professional development course, participants are asked to rate the learning opportunity, provide written feedback, and share any wishes for future sessions using session specific Google Forms. These forms will seek to ascertain which portions of the learning experience felt most impactful, as well as areas for improvement. Then, one month after the course is completed, a follow-up Google Form evaluation will be sent via email. This time, the questions will ask participants to share about the relevance of the learning within their classroom in the weeks during and following the learning experience, the effectiveness of the strategies and resources shared, and the impact of the strategies on their students. This final assessment seeks to discover which aspects have lasting effects on teachers and students after the course has ended.

Chapter Summary

Chapter Three has served to describe my Capstone project, a five-session professional development course centered around self-reflection, bias education, and literacy resource building. Educators who attend this experience engage in exercises to better understand racism in the current education system and their own experiences which have created and reinforced bias. Through research-based adult education methods, participants learn strategies for deconstructing their own biases, interrupting the biases

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demonstrated in others' actions, and utilizing literacy for anti-racism education with early elementary students. I described the ideal setting and audience for this professional learning opportunity, as well as the timeline of the creation of this project. I shared the assessment plan for improving upon this professional learning experience over time.

In Chapter Four, I reflect upon my experiences creating this project to emphasize my learnings throughout the process. I will circle back to the literature review to connect portions which proved to be most influential to the creation of my professional development project. I touch upon the potential implications and the limitations of my project, and suggest some potential directions for future research on this topic. I conclude with an evaluation of the benefits of my project within the education field.

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CHAPTER FOUR

Conclusion

Overview

Over the course of two years, Hamline's MALEd program provided me with an opportunity to synthesize my lived experiences, new knowledge, and deeper understanding of my own capabilities, as both an educator and as a learner. These aspects all came together in the writing of this paper and the creation of my Capstone project. My program began one week after the death of George Floyd and the subsequent events in my own Minneapolis neighborhood. I remember feeling an enormous responsibility to be a better teacher and learn how to better serve my students when it comes to the persistent racism that surrounds us all. Through the process of completing this Capstone, I feel I have done something that matters, something that will undoubtedly change me forever, and something that will hopefully have lasting effects in my professional field.

I developed a five session professional development course in order to uncover answers to

the question: *How can White educators utilize literacy to more confidently and competently discuss race and racism with their early elementary students?* This learning opportunity focused on institutional racism, bias education, self-reflective activities, and

the sharing of literacy resources to support participants in achieving the feeling of confidence and competence in race discussions with their students. In this fourth and final

chapter I share my major learnings gained through the process of writing this paper and

creating my project. I revisit the pieces of research from Chapter Two that were most influential to the creation of my project. I discuss broader implications of this work, the limitations of my project design, and potential areas for further research in relation to my

research question and my project. Finally, I discuss ways in which communicating my

project results could benefit the education field as a whole, and wrap up the chapter and paper with some final thoughts.

Major Learnings

While I am incredibly proud of my finished Capstone product, the part that had the biggest effect on my own learning occurred through the process of completing the project itself. I knew the concept of my project was always of paramount importance, but I never expected that the challenges I would face along the way would stick with me more than the content of my research itself. I have learned that the work of anti-racist and bias education is not only critically important, but it is also a remarkably emotional and never-ending journey.

Racialized Trauma

In the past seven months of my life, I have had the same conversation numerous times with anyone who asks how my masters work is going. Every time I am asked about my topic and I rattle off my research question, I receive the same response: “Wow, that’s heavy!” I couldn’t agree more. In my second chapter, I briefly discussed concepts of White guilt as a barrier for understanding one’s own bias and deconstructing bias and racism, and then I realized I was living it. I completed every one of the activities in my professional development course myself and worked through a ton of bias awareness and deconstruction in my personal life through the process of this Capstone. I have reflected upon the ways my White privilege has directly and indirectly given me advantages in both my personal and professional life. I have come to recognize how I let my own White fragility and White guilt act as an excuse to avoid enacting the work I was writing about.

I constantly felt I wasn't doing enough, or doing the BIPOC community justice. My mental health steeply declined throughout my writing of this paper and the completion of this project. I wanted to give up. I continue to feel guilt for the emotional toll this work has had on me, when I know my White emotional trauma is nothing in comparison to the emotional trauma the BIPOC community faces throughout their entire lives just by living in their bodies.

Then I found and read the book *My Grandmother's Hands* by Resmaa Menakem (2021). The author of this text helped me understand that racialized trauma lives within all of our bodies, regardless of race, and this trauma comes to the surface when faced with the discomfort of addressing our own racism and bias. I learned my trauma response is natural and every human has racialized trauma in some form that has been passed down through our DNA over many generations. Menakem states "each individual body has its own unique trauma response, and each body needs (and deserves) to heal" (p. 18). Through the reading of this text, in combination with my recent experience, I have learned the importance of mental health awareness, self-care, and racialized trauma healing in engaging with anti-racism and bias education. As I planned my professional development course, I aimed to incorporate these concepts with participants so they may feel prepared for the emotional work involved and for coping with these emotions through their journey. It is also key to remember that these emotional coping skills continue to develop over time, which leads me to my next major learning. ***Limitless Learning***

When I first chose my topic and envisioned my project, I was highly critical of

any cultural awareness and anti-racism focused professional development opportunities

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have attended in the past. I remembered they all felt too short and only focused on the topic at a surface level. I knew I wanted to do more, dig deeper, and have a real and lasting impact as a result of my professional development course. I found an abundance of ideas for activities from those I experienced during my MAEd program courses, those I discovered through my research process, and those recommended by my content expert based on her professional experience in the field of anti-racism and bias education. Yet, when it came time to begin creating my project, I was frozen, staring at a blank page and feeling like an imposter. How could I possibly fit all of these ideas into such a short course without speeding through too quickly and skimming only the surface of the topic? How could I know which activities would be the most impactful for participants? What if I don't focus enough on one aspect, and too much on another, or leave something out completely? These questions plagued my mind for days, and then weeks. I felt too debilitated to even begin planning.

I finally came to an essential realization. Of course it is impossible to fit all anti-racism and bias education into a five session course, or even a two year masters program for that matter. However, the fear of not doing enough cannot allow us to avoid doing anything at all. Any steps, even the smallest steps, have more of an impact than standing still. While my project mostly consisted of planning some great learning opportunities for my participants, what I most want my participants to leave with is a yearning for continuing their journey of growth in anti-racism practices and bias awareness and deconstruction.

This is a major reason I created an ongoing learning community to follow the completion of my professional development course, not only for participants but for myself as well. I learned I am not an imposter, but rather a work in

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progress. I will never know everything there is to know about racism and bias, but I have taken noteworthy steps toward growth and plan to continue doing so for the rest of my life.

Revisiting the Literature

The research component of this Capstone proved to be an even more insightful mechanism for learning than I was expecting. While it found a home later in my second chapter, the first subtopic I actually researched was the age-appropriateness of race discussions with early elementary age students. I decided in order to carry out my work on this topic, I needed to confirm that my research question is a valid and relevant one. The study conducted by Sullivan and colleagues (2021) confirmed my suspicions about myself and other educators, in that we tend to underestimate the ability of young children to discuss concepts of race and racism, by nearly five years according to their findings. Even though I have experienced this underestimation of students' abilities to conceptualize race, I was shocked by the amount of time these researchers found educators waste when they avoid discussing the topic. Research carried out by Kemple et al. (2016), Katz (2003), and Cristol and Gimbert (2008) agreed that even infants demonstrate awareness of racial differences. Furthermore, these, and other researchers, found evidence that children in early childhood begin making decisions and acting upon these observable differences (Bigler & Wright, 2014; Copenhaver-Johnson, 2006; Steele

et al., 2018). The considerable amount of evidence I found affirmed the importance of my topic and increased my passion for helping other educators, and myself, to realize the necessity and validity of having conversations about race and racism with early learners.

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As far as the content of my project is concerned, the research I found involving bias education proved to be the most helpful. From Milner's (2003) race reflective journal exercises focused on our racialized histories and educators' power in the classroom to Pearce's (2019) strategies for deconstructing bias through microaggression roleplay, I found evidence-based activities for participants to engage with throughout my professional development course. While my own expertise is in the field of elementary and literacy education, these experts informed my knowledge base of bias education with adults. My analysis of literature by Starck et al. (2020) and Crowley (2019) confirmed bias education is an imperative component of developing educators' confidence and competence in race related discussions. This evidence compelled me to spend a significant amount of time on bias education throughout the course of my professional development sessions.

A third set of literature corroborated the connection between race, bias, and literacy in the classroom. Hardy et al. (2020) found that students gravitate toward books where they see themselves represented, which reminds educators to make these representative texts available to their students. Rogers and Mosley (2006) and Gardner (2017) emphasized that educators must take it a step further than just having BIPOC representative texts available to students, but that we must guide students to understand the concepts embedded within these texts. Researching the utilization of literacy was the fun part in

the heaviness of anti-racism and bias education. Seeing the multitude of BIPOC representative texts available and finding tools such as Booksource's (n.d.) *Inclusive Classroom Library Checklist* and McLaughlin and DeVoogd's (2004) critical literacy lesson examples allowed me to remember that educators have actionable steps we

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can take in our classrooms to represent our students and support their understanding of the critical concepts of race and racism.

Implications

Although I have not yet had the opportunity to carry out my professional development course with real participants, I would like to make it a reality in the near future. The intention is that participants would be impacted by the important work of reflecting on their own bias with a group of dedicated peers, as well as through sharing experiences and resources for ongoing learning beyond the course. Even without conducting the course itself, I believe anyone who is interested, reads my work, and sees my project could be inspired to complete some of the activities independently or with colleagues, find a similarly constructed professional learning opportunity, or create one of their own to carry out. My work on this project demonstrates one way of connecting activities and ideas, but I would encourage any other interested parties to explore the multitude of resources, activities, and opportunities for learning that exist and could be called upon to engage with essential anti-racism and bias education. Besides the benefits to educators themselves, the more teachers engage with this type of learning, the more students will reap the benefits as a result, and this is truly my goal. I hope this project has a ripple effect that extends far beyond the boundaries of my own classroom. **Limitations**

One main limitation of my project is that I was unable to carry out the professional learning course itself with actual educators. For this reason, my findings are limited in that I have no measure of the effectiveness of this learning experience as reported by participants and their students. I would like to someday implement this

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course with educators, get a grasp of its effectiveness in benefitting teachers and students, and make continued improvements based upon participant feedback. A second, and critical, limitation in the creation of my paper and project is the lack of representation of BIPOC voices in the creation of this professional development. Given that I was creating the paper and project independently, I was somewhat limited in the amount of BIPOC support I could receive while creating the project myself. I made efforts to include BIPOC authors and researchers in my literature review, and sought out resources created by BIPOC throughout my professional development planning. In an ideal world, I would have liked to co-design my professional development course with an interested member of the BIPOC community. I purposely chose my content expert because of her professional expertise in the field of bias education for adults, but even she is a White female, like myself. My Capstone facilitators and my peer reviewers are all White females as well. I do feel additional guilt for not making a more concerted effort to incorporate BIPOC voices, at least in the review of my work, but this is something I would certainly prioritize if and when I am able to carry out my professional development course someday in the future.

Future Research

As mentioned above, being limited in my ability to implement this learning opportunity

prevented me from gaining a true understanding of my project's efficacy. When I am able to conduct this course with educators, I would be interested to measure its perceived effectiveness for the participants and their students. An entirely different study could compare a control group of educators and those who engage in my

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professional development course to analyze differences in race related questioning skills, comfort levels, or frequency of conversations dealing with race over a set amount of time. During my literature review, I discovered another area for further research. I found there to be a sparse set of literature related to the effects of race and racism conversations with children. Bigler and Wright (2014) investigated potential risks and benefits of discussing race and racism, but their evidence was mostly based around reported benefits and negative effects on adults who engage in these conversations. The vast majority of literature I found agreed adults should become more comfortable talking to children about these topics, and even included ideas on how to do so, but very few reported the lasting impacts on children emotionally, physically, or intellectually. I feel this compelling gap in evidence would present an interesting focus for research that could be analyzed in connection with my project.

Communicating Results to Benefit the Profession

In addition to publishing my work in the Hamline University Digital Commons for fellow and future students to read, I also plan to share my paper and project ideas with colleagues. I truly feel that any educator would benefit from reading my paper to learn more about the impacts of racism and bias in education. Additionally, I have learned a lot of useful knowledge that I can bring with me into my classroom, but this Capstone

process has me pondering ways to create a larger ripple effect of my work. I may choose to use my paper and project as artifacts to apply for alternative job opportunities where I could potentially share my learning with the next generations of educators. Perhaps I could put my project to use in a position where I could focus on presenting similar professional development opportunities to schools across the state or the country. The

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more educators I could reach to engage with anti-racism and bias education, the more students would feel the impacts of their teachers' confidence in breaking the silence on racism in the classroom.

Chapter Summary

Throughout this journey of learning, I set out to discover *How can White educators utilize literacy to more confidently and competently discuss race and racism with their early elementary students?* As I have completed my Capstone, I have taken with me the knowledge that engaging with anti-racism and bias education is undoubtedly important work, but also requires special attention to mental health and healing no matter what body you are living in. Additionally, I gained an understanding that this work will never be complete, but rather it is an ongoing process of learning and improving throughout one's life. In this chapter I have explained these major learnings along with the main pieces of literature that informed the creation of my professional development project. I have detailed the implication this project could have on participants and students, the limitations I encountered through my creation process, and future research I think would be of value to answering my research question. Finally, I stated ways in which my communication of results could benefit the field of education.

Almost two years ago, I found myself devastated and yearning to do better in the wake of yet another unjust BIPOC death that rocked my community. Throughout my Hamline MAEd journey, I have developed and deepened my passion for serving my students by becoming an advocate for race and racism discussions in the classroom. Especially after grappling with my own mental health decline throughout this work, I want students to feel supported by competent adults as they wade through understanding

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race and racism early on, in order to avoid the negative repercussions of silence around these topics during their formative years. I have learned a vast amount of new knowledge and gained an incredible amount of understanding about my own bias and need for continued personal improvement. As challenging as this work was, I never wavered in understanding how important it is and always will be. I can only hope that anyone who reads my work, engages with my project, or even feels curious about my topic will embark on a worthwhile journey of discovery toward better serving all of their students. When we do the work to look inside ourselves, we can gain the courage to speak up with and for our learners who will make up the world's next generations of compassionate and equity-focused adults.

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