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The Effect of Antiracist Children's Literature on Developing Racial Awareness in Early Childhood

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**The Effect of Antiracist Children's Literature on Developing Racial Awareness
in Early Childhood**

Submitted on May 18, 2022

in fulfillment of final requirements for the MAED degree

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I would like to thank my daughter for her tremendous role and participation in this project. It is a privilege to be both her mother and her Montessori guide. As well, my entire family has been incredibly encouraging of my work, allowing me to dedicate abundant time and energy during the evenings and weekends pursuing my degree. Additionally, I wish to thank my professors, my project coach, as well as my fabulous cohort for the uplifting environment of support and camaraderie, providing motivation to accomplish our dreams together. Finally, my ongoing gratitude to the visionary Dr. Maria Montessori, who continues to inspire me to deepen my understanding of the Montessori philosophy and to improve my practice toward a more just, equitable, and liberated world for all children and families.

Abstract

In this study, I asked the question, “*What effect will antiracist children’s literature have on a white, homeschooled, 5-year-old child’s developing awareness of race and racial issues?*” Over the course of four weeks, my child and I read and discussed antiracist children’s literature, and then I recorded my child’s signs of developing racial awareness using qualitative and quantitative data tools. In analysis of this data, I discovered that my child’s developing awareness focused more heavily on race and the understanding of skin tones than on racial issues such as a sense of equality. This finding aligns with early child developmental expectations that a child at age five typically relates better to concrete concepts before understanding abstract concepts. I concluded that antiracist work in early childhood, using children’s literature as a conduit, normalizes critical racial conversations and is an important part of a larger social justice education movement. Further recommendations for research include following my child’s developing racial awareness into the second plane of development (ages 6-9) and expanding this study into other early childhood educational settings to obtain more data for analysis.

Keywords: antiracist education, social justice education, early childhood education, antiracist children’s literature, homeschool education, race, racial issues, racial awareness

Introduction

In the scope of this action research project, I have made a case that the time has come for an explicit and proactive movement for the inclusion of antiracist education in early childhood; furthermore, the use of children's literature provides an ideal conduit to introduce issues of race and racism in a way that is effective and age-appropriate. Today's polarized sociopolitical climate brings heightened awareness to the urgent need for an emphasis on not only Montessori's concept of peace education but an even more robust social justice education as the enduring solution to humanity's many ongoing inequities. The relevance of beginning social justice education in early childhood is supported by evidence that biases and prejudices are instilled in children at a surprisingly young age (Zakin, 2012). This study focuses on antiracist education, specifically, as a way of opening dialogue among educators, parents, and children to destigmatize and normalize having what may be perceived as difficult and uncomfortable conversations rather than avoiding or postponing them. The use of children's literature is an effective and age-appropriate means of achieving meaningful discussions around topics of race, racism, and racial issues (Gibson et al, 2014). In this way, the hope is that early childhood education can become a home to humanity's critical work of ensuring a more just and equitable world.

The research was carried out in a homeschool setting with a focus on my 5-year-old daughter. With my growing consciousness about the importance of explicit antiracist education combined with an awareness of my ability to provide a better foundation for my daughter's own social justice education, I felt compelled to conduct a project using children's literature as a tool to carry out this work. It is important to state my positionality as a white female in a white family with a white child. Recognizing the lack of racial diversity in my community, I felt that

an antiracist conversation was important and hoped that books would be a natural conduit to initiate conversations and discussions about race and racism. I believed that there was a critical call to begin this work now rather than waiting for a supposedly more opportune time later.

My research questions asked: *What is the effect of antiracist children's literature on a white, homeschooled, 5-year-old child's developing awareness of race and racial issues?* With a one-on-one relationship with my daughter - centered on the reading of antiracist children's books over a 4-week period - I had the unique experience of studying her developing awareness of race and racial issues outside of a classroom setting and within the home environment. At the age of 5, my daughter greatly enjoyed reading the books together, and she was able to communicate her observations, feelings, questions, and concerns about racial issues presented in the books. In carrying out this work with my own child, I had the opportunity as an educator to experience firsthand how other parents would also be able to share books and discussions with their own children. My project revealed the relevance of beginning antiracist education during early childhood and the value of the use of children's books as a natural bridge to rich and meaningful discussions beyond the scope of what we may encounter in our own environments and settings. It is not too early to begin social justice education with a young child; quite the contrary, a child as young as 5 is highly capable of grappling with concepts of racial awareness when presented in an age-appropriate way and using books to open minds and hearts through candid discussions.

Theoretical Framework

My action research is grounded in the theoretical framework of Constructivism. A child-centered approach to education developed primarily from the work of psychologists and theorists Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, the constructivist framework views children as active participants in their own learning. As active learning moves from experience to conceptualization, the

activity leads to the concepts (Schunk, 2012). While there are many variations to the definition of constructivist learning, there are generally four agreed-upon aspects of constructivism: (1) learning depends on what individuals already know, (2) new ideas occur as individuals adapt and change their old ideas, (3) learning involves inventing ideas rather than mechanically accumulating a series of facts, (4) meaningful learning occurs through rethinking old ideas and coming to new conclusions about new ideas which conflict with our old ideas (Amineh and Asl, 2015). Constructivist approaches to education seek to ignite a child's curiosity and love of learning through hands-on, meaningful experiences, sparking an interest in underlying educational concepts, thereby allowing students to experience the joy and wonder of discovery and to construct their own truths and worldviews.

I chose the Constructivist theoretical framework for my research because of its emphasis on the child's self-construction, and due to its foundational ties to Montessori as well. Maria Montessori expressed an underlying philosophy of Constructivism when she reflected on the critical importance of a child's own efforts in the process of self-development. She wrote that the work of the child is, "an energy always freshly constructive, the unceasing labour of spiritual incarnation. Thus, the human personality forms itself by itself, like the embryo, and the child becomes the creator of the man, the father of the man." (Montessori, p. 31). I plan to center the child as the focus of this research and to study her developing awareness of race and racism as a social construct. While there are other supporting theoretical frameworks tied to this project - antibias/antiracist education and critical literacy, for example – the overarching focus of the research is on the work of the child. In seeking to understand the child's construction of impressions, opinions, and beliefs on racial issues - from her own point of view - I am looking at the development of her understanding and awareness through a constructivist lens. In other

words, how do the child's experiences interacting with antiracist books affect her burgeoning construction of racial awareness as she develops language and concepts to match her previous knowledge and observations? As we share book readings and have discussions together, I will be looking to gauge her self-discovery.

In the following Literature Review section, I will discuss themes associated with the role of children's literature in early childhood antiracist education as it relates to the development of a child's racial awareness. To that end, I will review the various articles to determine and discuss what other researchers have contributed to this topic. My aim is to discover how antiracist children's literature affects the developing awareness of race and racial issues for a white, 5-year-old child. Applying a Constructivist theoretical framework allows me to view the child as work-in-progress as she builds her own knowledge and understanding through a shared of experience of book-reading, dialogue, follow-up activities, and conversations. Through a lens of self-development and self-construction, it is possible to witness the effects and outcomes of children's literature in early childhood antiracist education.

Review of Literature

This literature review begins with an examination of the role of peace education within the Montessori pedagogy. From there I look to moving beyond peace education and toward a more robust social justice education. The term social justice education itself is defined to clarify its use in this study. Furthermore, the literature review then progresses to an investigation of beginning social justice education during early childhood with a focus on antiracist education, specifically. Finally, the literature review centers children's literature as a conduit to carrying out the important work of social justice education in early childhood.

Montessori & Peace Education

In the tradition of Montessori, there is a longstanding principle of Peace Education. Both a philosophy as well as a practice, peace education upholds the value of respect for all people's fundamental human rights. Maria Montessori is considered the first educator to reflect on peace education, and in her book "Education for a New World", she wrote that "Preventing conflicts is the work of politics; establishing peace is the work of education" (Guetta, 2013, p.167).

Montessori envisioned a widespread and lasting peace that depended upon an education that would free children's spirits, promoting love and justice for all others. UNESCO defines peace education as "a set of values, attitudes, models of behavior and ways of life that reject violence and prevent conflicts" (Guetta, 2013, p. 169) and it becomes "a strategy, a medium, and a fundamental and necessary social engagement...in the respect of differences and social justice" (Guetta, 2013, p. 170). Montessori's groundbreaking message of peace has been carried forward to this day, with specific attention to its importance included in Montessori teacher training programs and peace education being practiced in Montessori classrooms worldwide.

From Peace Education to Social Justice Education

As educators today, peace education is a call to action to uphold and carry forward Montessori's enduring vision of a more just and equitable world. The United Nations itself has challenged educators to prepare children for life in a multicultural society "in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all people, ethnic, national, and religious groups and people of indigenous origin" (Hawkins, 2014, p. 726). Moreover, there is a growing movement to expand peace education into the realm of social justice education as a form of "conscience raising that encourages students to explore social

justice issues where sensitivities are raised to the point that makes injustices intolerable” (Hawkins, 2014, p. 726).

Defining Social Justice Education

To build a rationale and a framework for teaching children about social justice, it is imperative to attempt to define the term “social justice” itself. In the scope of this research, the definition of social justice varies, although the concept of equity and/or fairness seems to be consistent throughout the studies. For instance, in one study, social justice is defined on the condition “that all children and families have the right to expect mutual respect, fair treatment, equal access to resources and experiences, and a willingness to learn about others’ perspectives” (William et al, 2006, p. 75). Extending the definition of social justice further, another author first discusses the concept of tolerance, defined as “peace, forbearance, and impartiality, as well as open-mindedness”, which essentially connotes caring and empathy. She then suggests that in addition to teaching tolerance, it might be better to teach social justice simultaneously, defined as “the principles and habits of mind that guide individuals to actively treat others with fairness, respect, and responsibility” (Zakin, 2012, p. 3). Perhaps the most robust definition of social justice from the research moves beyond the *distributive paradigm*, which is based on material inequality, and is no longer considered sufficient in terms of expressing the complexities of injustice as seen in society today. Instead, the *recognition paradigm* views injustice as being entrenched in the bedrock of society’s structures, both political and economic. This lens of social justice takes into account the cultural marginalization and exploitation of groups of people which leads to today’s widespread, systemic inequities (Hawkins, 2014).

Next, it is important to center the theme of social justice education and to clarify its importance and relevance to children. From there one can recognize the call for social justice as

not only a curricular choice, but moreover, as an educational movement. According to Zakin (2012), children are acutely aware of differences such as skin color and begin to internalize assessments of others from a young age. Therefore, children require assistance in acknowledging and making sense of diversity to develop empathy and appreciation for others who are different from themselves.

Hawkins (2014) posits that “embracing such a curriculum [that supports and promotes social justice] is not an easy task but an imperative one for a harmonious, just and peaceful future” (p. 126). Furthermore, teaching for social justice is a form of “conscience raising” that goes beyond solely curricular and becomes a movement based on deep reflection and a subsequent call to action (Hawkins, 2014). Moreover, “educators need to create spaces for children to imagine hopeful futures in which wealth, privilege, and power are no longer the driving forces” (Williams et al, 2006, p. 78). Along the same lines, teachers who are committed to this work with children “with raised consciousness and a determination to expose injustice” (Hyland, 2010, p. 90) can effectively create positive and long-term societal changes toward a more just and equitable future. As children’s worlds become increasingly globalized, it is essential to create environments where children can conceptualize and contextualize social practices and power discourses (Dunkerly-Bean, 2017).

Social Justice Education in Early Childhood

The question remains as to when to include social justice education and to address the appropriateness of its inclusion in early childhood curriculum. Overall, the literature suggests that not only is early childhood suitable, but its incorporation is also imperative. However, there are some arguments that call into question with whom the responsibility lies: educators and/or families. There are some who assert that moral development should remain within the purview

of the family (Zakin, 2012). However, others recognize the importance of a home to school continuum. "While families are a critical piece in shaping children's values on such matters, classroom practices communicate and reinforce strong, subtle, and repeated social messages about what is and is not valued" (Hyland, 2010, p. 82). To further confront conventional wisdom that argues that issues of injustice are inappropriate for young children, one must only question the alternative: "while we are waiting for young children to be developmentally ready to consider these issues, they are already developing values and beliefs about them" (Hyland, 2010, p.88). In this way, it is arguably imperative that early childhood education embraces the growing movement to include social justice education with young children from the outset. Just as we begin teaching toward literacy before children can even write the alphabet, "we must begin the work of teaching toward liberation early in the lives of children...to create literacy opportunities that help children construct equitable and empowering understandings of race and diversity" (Lee et al, 2021, p. 57). In early childhood programs and in preschool and primary classrooms, teachers should address injustice and develop equity-based pedagogies to create more just learning environments.

Antiracist Education in Focus

For many years, early childhood educators engaged in a "colorblind" approach to multicultural education, which may at first appear to be politically neutral while in fact exacerbating racial oppression. Consequently, there has been an urgent call for a complete reexamination of the colorblind philosophy (Kemple et al, 2015). Instead, it is asserted that children's awareness and acceptance of human diversity should begin from a young age, and that early experiences should build on the "concrete, the observable and tangible, the aspects of human difference that are most readily accessible for very young children to notice and to reflect

upon” (Kemple et al, 2015, p. 98). Without ample opportunities to carry out their observations and question their findings, children will internalize the implicit message that racial conversations are “bad”. Instead, with the aid of adults to guide their inquiries, children can construct a growing awareness of the racial diversity of the world around them. Adults intentionally and proactively serve to encourage children to talk about their curiosity in a “color-filled” way, developing ease with and respect for physical differences, celebrating all which humans have in common, developing racial pride and equity, all within the framework of an accurate and developmentally appropriate context (Kemple et al, 2015, p. 99).

The Role of Children's Literature

To serve as a conduit for introducing themes and ideas of social justice to children, it can be both beneficial and practical to incorporate and exemplify multicultural literature. Indeed, many educators today look to the materials in their classrooms to ensure that diversity is represented in their content and curriculum (Hyland, 2010). However, as a word of caution, it is important to note that presenting only an occasional book to children about diversity, focused on a racial or ethnic group for example, while the majority of the other classroom books are based on White or White cultural norms, negatively reinforces a Eurocentric message, and prioritizes one group over another (Hyland, 2010). This message implies an endemic system of power and privilege to children, based on what is considered the norm and what is the exception. To that end, there are some childhood researchers who argue that relying solely on books as the primary source of literacy instruction reinforces a set of values rooted in White, middle-class norms whereas other children whose home literacy practices may be oral or based on popular media are being set up for a curricular disadvantage (Hyland, 2010). With that in mind, educators are nonetheless

compelled to initiate conversations built around topics of social justice by creating a high-quality, carefully curated curriculum of multicultural books and other literacy support materials.

Highly attuned and well-prepared teachers are then, by extension, a critical element in the child's learning environment in their role as facilitators of social justice discussions. According to Gibson et al (2014), a teacher training program undertook the task of aiding in the establishment of a social justice curriculum. The content of the study focused on using multicultural literacy as a vehicle for sparking critical conversations that would ultimately and ideally drive curricular changes. While initially many of the teachers in training felt resistant to the work of social justice, "the use of quality authentic literature supported by lessons...has opened a new world to our students. Literature is something they can relate to and helps give them a basis for beginning to gain a language and understanding of the needed conversations" (Gibson et al, 2014, p. 41). Seen in this light, multicultural literature offers something concrete, tangible, and relatable for both teachers and children alike to share a common experience through storytelling and then to springboard into a larger shared conversation and dialogue based on the lessons learned in the story while building empathy and compassion for the characters, not only for their celebrations and triumphs but also for their dilemmas and struggles. Without the conduit of multicultural literature, these conversations simply may not occur due to lack of comfort, awareness, and know-how. However, according to Beneke (2018), in the absence of these discussion, children lack language to contextualize their experiences and observations. In other words, "young children will not have strategies to disrupt racism if we do not teach them to recognize it" (Beneke, 2018, p. 74). Through multicultural literature, educators can generate conversations and engage children in critical thinking on issues of equity and justice. In this way, children become empowered in voicing their thoughts and teachers become key facilitators

in exploring issues of fairness as they help students begin to consider their role in making the world more just and equitable.

To succeed in their role as facilitators and guides, educators must continually engage in practices of critical reflection. While teachers may initially define themselves as non-biased, upon deeper and closer consideration, there are many areas where biases exist as a natural, if unwanted, product of long-term socialization and enculturation, and is also true for children. Social justice education is interrogative in nature and carries a heavy load, a term referred to as *emotion labor* (Beneke, 2018). Nonetheless, the emotion labor is essential to the social justice educator's ability to navigate, with heightened awareness and responsiveness, the complexity and range of issues at stake in undertaking critical and culturally sustaining pedagogies. Equity pedagogy works under the assumption that unless teachers and schools continually counter injustice, by default they then support it. Further, until educators examine their daily classroom practice, they continue to support a power hierarchy that privileges some groups while marginalizing others (Beneke, 2018).

Again, multicultural literacy offers the ideal conduit for presenting and developing these ideas. When working specifically with younger children in an early childhood setting, children's literature has the potential to assist young learners in developing positive racial identity. "Books can be mirrors in which children see and savor images and representations similar to their own lives. They can also be windows that enable young readers to gain new cultural perspectives by peering into others' worlds" (Wanless et al, 2016, p. 9). Teachers must critically interrogate children's literature to ensure that they are offering opportunities to "see various points of view of multiple characters, increase their sense of justice and equity...and provide the rich opportunities for classrooms to participate in dialogue" (Burke, A. & Collier, D., 2017, p. 274).

Furthermore, multicultural literacy can teach about race and racial justice using the critical literacy approach which states that “disrupting commonly accepted understandings; interrogating multiple viewpoints; focusing on sociopolitical issues; and taking social action to promote social justice” (Thomas, 2021, p. 55). By selecting a broad range of high quality and diverse books, educators proactively develop culturally sustaining classrooms that promote the construction of a burgeoning social awareness and introduce issues of social justice.

Discussion & Conclusion

The body of research in review indicates that there is a growing movement in social justice education, which seeks to include early childhood in its scope. To that end, there is also evidence to indicate that the use of multicultural literacy is a tangible, hands-on conduit to introduce and initiate important conversations pertaining to the topic of social justice. The strengths of the research suggest that there are positive outcomes when discussions of key concepts are led by educators who are motivated to uncover not only their own biases but also any preexisting patterns of thought in children regarding biases and prejudices toward others deemed different from themselves. Because young children are actively observing and constructing their social awareness, they are equipped to engage in lessons and develop language around social justice topics that are age-appropriate and developmentally suitable.

Weaknesses to the research include the fact that the studies are limited in scale and scope, and that much of the work is conceptual and theoretical in nature with a focus on teacher training programs to prepare educators for multicultural classrooms and preliminary social justice work. Herein lies a gap in the research where I would like to examine the effects of antiracist children's literature on a homeschooled, 5-year-old child's developing awareness of race and racial issues.

In conclusion, based on this review of literature, the movement toward social justice education is increasing in scope and scale, incorporating early childhood, and it is utilizing multicultural literacy as a conduit for carrying out the important work of creating a more just and equitable future for tomorrow's global citizens. Specifically, it is possible to destigmatize and normalize critical conversations around race and racism beginning as soon as early childhood. There is great hope and promise for positive, transformative outcomes not only for children and educators but for society overall.

Methodology

Brief Overview

With the research question "*What effect will antiracist children's literature have on a white, homeschooled, 5-year-old child's developing awareness of race and racial issues?*", I designed a 4-week antiracist book study to carry out with my 5-year-old daughter in our homeschool setting. At age 5, she was actively constructing her awareness of race and racial issues. To support her developing awareness, I utilized antiracist children's books as a conduit to conduct discussions and to create opportunities for shared dialogue. I developed data tools to capture her experience from her own perspective and to record my efforts and reflections in this endeavor.

The Intervention

Beginning on Monday January 3, 2022, and continuing for the next 4 weeks of January, I designed a book study to introduce antiracist children's books to my daughter. Throughout the duration of this study, each Monday morning, as part of my regular homeschool routine, I read an antiracist storybook to my child from a selection of high-interest, engaging, and age-appropriate titles (Appendix A). I chose these specific books to align with the comprehension

level of my daughter to match her interest and attention, with an appropriate ratio of text to illustrations so that the books would not be too dense, overbearing, or overwhelming. I preferred to offer photographs versus illustrations. Where there were illustrations instead of photographs, I preferred that they be more realistic than cartoonish. Finally, I selected books with precise language, rich vocabulary, and which focused on promoting positive racial identity.

The Monday reading time incorporated shared dialogue and vocabulary-building opportunities around concepts of race and racial issues. The weekly reading sessions were recorded for further analysis and data collection with transcription to allow me to determine the exact use of language in building vocabulary and awareness around concepts of race and racism. The reading and discussion typically lasted anywhere from 10 to 15 minutes, and the conversation and vocabulary grew out of the reading organically and without a pre-determined script of any sort, which would have been foreign and uncomfortable to the established homeschool norms and culture. Because the child is my daughter and we share a strong relationship, I understood her verbal and non-verbal cues during the reading and discussions. I knew when to press further into the conversation and when to move on to maintain a natural flow to the reading and conversation without a sense of pressure or an adult agenda.

Additionally, each week after reading and sharing a story and then having ample time to peruse the book at her leisure, my daughter had the opportunity to color drawings of children using blank outlines of children's figures. She had access to art supplies (crayons and colored pencils) which offered an array of skin tones. My child typically chose to color the children immediately after the readings as a high-interest and fun follow-up activity. She then dictated open-ended stories about the children she colored (Appendix B). I encouraged my daughter to "tell me a story about these children", but there was never any pressure or expectation that the

stories had to reflect the books in anyway. The story could be about anything she imagined and wanted to tell me. The rationale behind the coloring and storytelling activities was to create a series of artifacts over the 4-week time-period to study the child's incorporation of race into her schema, lexicon, and narratives as she imagined the world around her and expressed herself in her own words.

Furthermore, throughout the 4-week time-period, I kept a teacher-researcher's journal to record and capture my thoughts, questions, concerns, and insights that occurred spontaneously outside of formal instructional time. The journal served as a record to capture my efforts as I planned the lessons, self-assessed, and reflected on the effectiveness of our reading sessions and concurrent discussions and dialogues (Appendix C). I hoped to practice self-reflection and to document my own thinking all the while observing not only my daughter's behavior and choices during the study but mine as well. I recorded the date, time, and location of the reading, the book's title, and any external factors that might affect the reading session such as the weather, etc. I asked myself the same three questions each week: 1.) How are you feeling overall about today's book reading/discussion?, 2.) What do you think went well with today's book reading/discussion, and 3.) What could you improve for the next book reading/discussion? I also had open-ended space in the weekly journal to record my thoughts, ideas, questions, concerns, and observations.

Another journal was dedicated specifically to gathering field notes and narratives as I observed my child throughout the day (Appendix D). This journal was a record of my daughter's thoughts, questions, and comments as they occurred when we were spending time together, but not when we were formally reading the books together. This journal allowed me to record date/time/location and external factors as well as observations and narratives. The

purpose of this record was to build a log of her experiences - as she expressed them aloud - as a way to attempt to capture her developing awareness of race and racial issues.

Additionally, I kept a tally sheet for each week of the study to record my child's use of new vocabulary as it occurred spontaneously throughout the week (Appendix E). The vocabulary words were selected from the books we read aloud together. I wrote the words down on the sheet for that week and then each time I overheard her use that vocabulary term, I made a tally mark on the sheet. The idea was to listen and take note as she incorporated new language into her daily lexicon thereby demonstrating her developing awareness of race and racial issues.

Finally, at the end of each week on Friday morning, my child completed an age-appropriate and child-friendly attitude scale to gauge her emotional responses to the experiences of shared reading, dialogue, coloring, and storytelling activities (Appendix F). The same three questions were asked each week: 1.) How do you feel overall about the book we read together this week?, 2.) How do you feel about the characters in the story?, and 3.) How do you feel about coloring and telling stories after we read the book? I wanted to look for any trends in her overall experience – from her own perspective - as she continually developed her racial awareness. I hoped that she could be candid in her feedback to the experience without any need to do or say the correct thing on my behalf. I felt that this was a strong way to gauge her emotional and attitudinal responses versus a more formal exit interview or post-survey given her young age. The weekly attitude scale also served to track her experiences over the 4-week time-period.

Data Collection Tools

The data tools used in this study – both qualitative and quantitative in nature - covered a full range of methods including artifacts, formal and informal observational data, as well as inquiry data (Appendices B-F). Taken altogether, the variety and range of methods allowed me

to triangulate and analyze the data for improved reliability and validity thereby increasing its usefulness and replicability for other educators in the future.

Analysis of Data

My action research posed the question, *“What effect will antiracist children’s literature have on a white, homeschooled, 5-year-old child’s developing awareness of race and racial issues?”* With a focus on my daughter’s construction of racial understanding, my aim was to observe and analyze the effects of antiracist children’s literature on her personal experience encountering concepts of race and racial issues in a more clear and explicit manner using children’s literature as a conduit for introducing new concepts, language, and having shared discussions. Given her age of 5 years old, I hoped to gather this data in a way that was age-appropriate and would allow for her most authentic feedback without any sense of pressure from me, especially given my relationship to her as a mother in addition to being her homeschool teacher. I was aware of my inherent bias as both her mother as well as the researcher during this study, and I sought to create objective data collection in so much as possible.

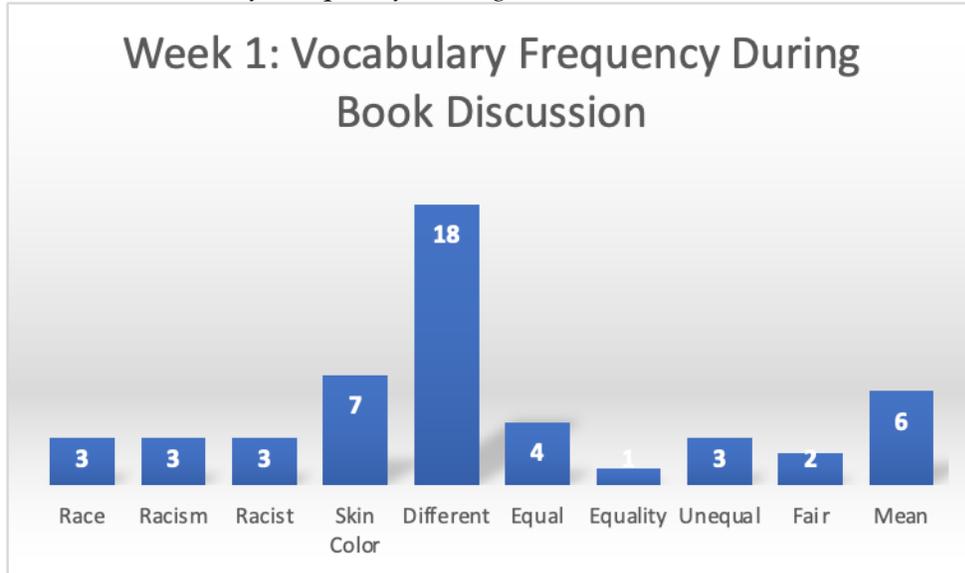
During the month of January 2022, my daughter and I read antiracist books each Monday, and I recorded the weekly readings and conversations for later analysis. I then transcribed the recordings to document the precise language used during the shared reading and dialogic experience. Next, using the transcripts, I analyzed each week’s reading to search for the most frequent vocabulary words that emerged from the discussions about the books.

Specifically, I chose to study the 10 most frequent vocabulary words related to concepts of race and racial issues to analyze their importance during the shared book reading and discussion. The following four figures (Figures 1-4) detail these high-frequency vocabulary words for each of the

four weeks of the study. Each figure represents one shared book reading and highlights the vocabulary that was being introduced and discussed for that week’s reading.

Figure 1

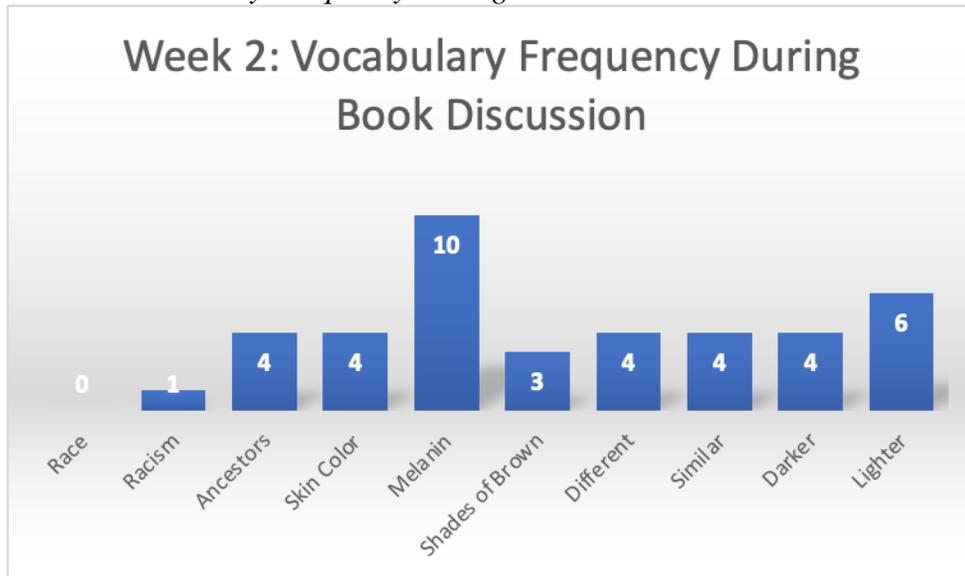
Week 1: Vocabulary Frequency During Book Discussion



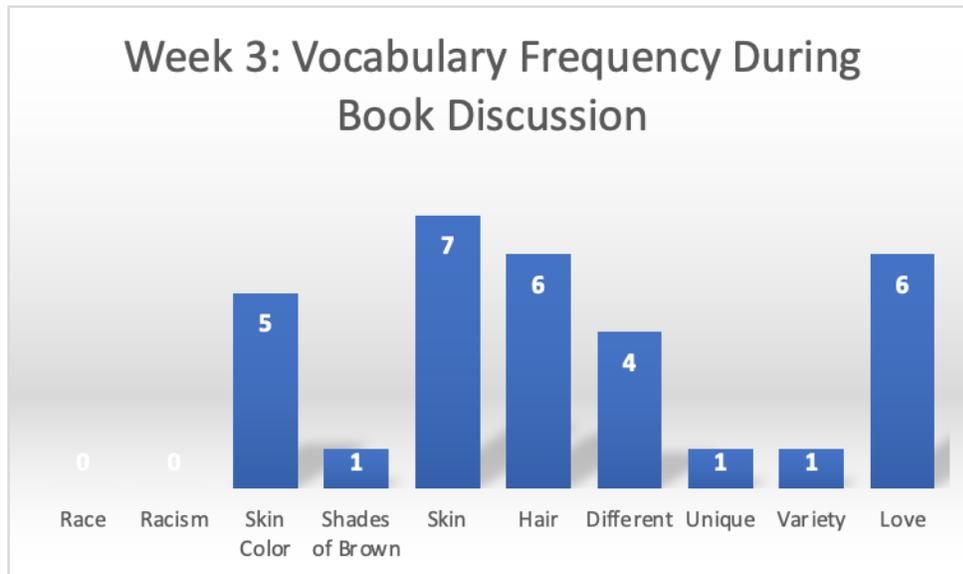
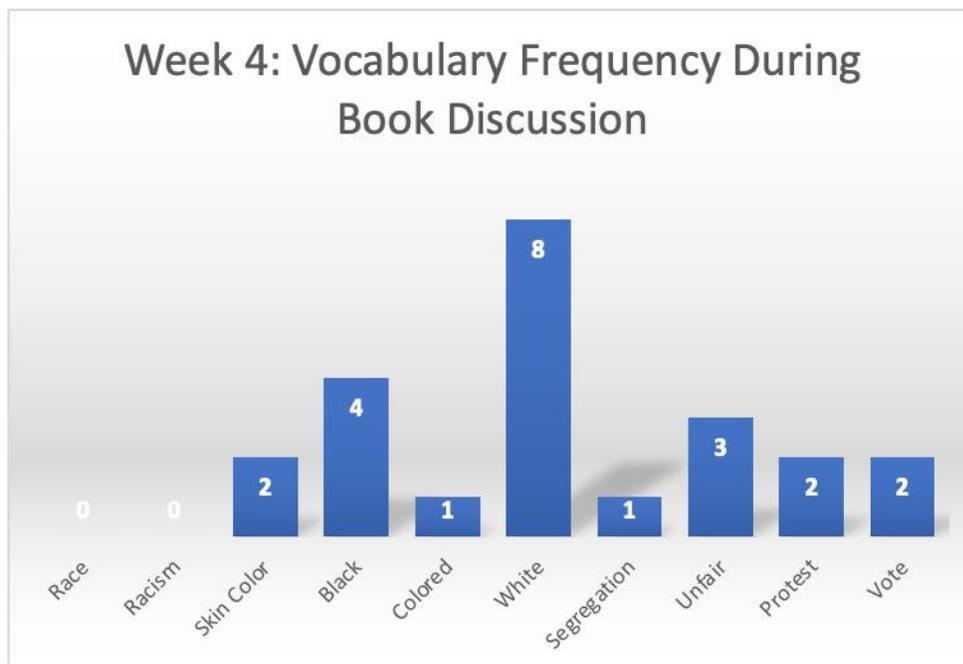
Note. Week 1 book title: The Skin I’m In: A First Look at Racism.

Figure 2

Week 2: Vocabulary Frequency During Book Discussion



Note. Week 2 book title: All the Colors We Are: The Story of How We Get Our Skin Color

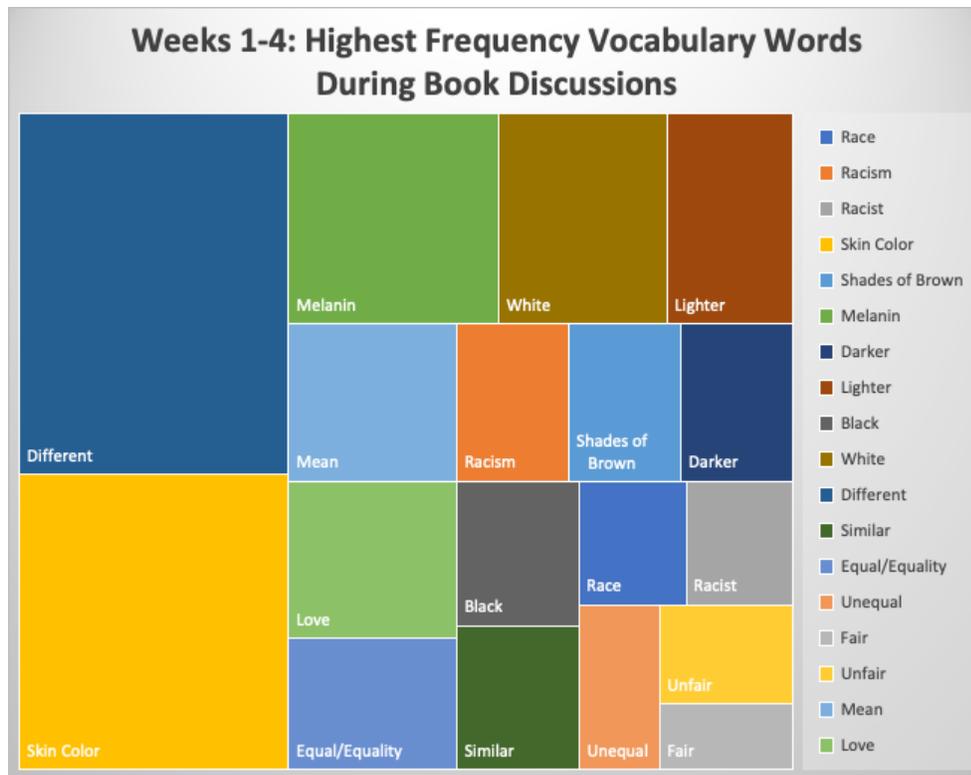
Figure 3*Week 3: Vocabulary Frequency During Book Discussion**Note. Week 3 book titles: Hair Like Mine and Skin Like Mine***Figure 4***Week 4: Vocabulary Frequency During Book Discussion*

Note. Week 4 book title: *My Little Golden Book About Martin Luther King Jr.*

My next step was to aggregate the data on vocabulary frequency to analyze it for further meaning. I combined all four weeks of vocabulary usage because I was curious to discover an overall picture of what sort of language emerged over the period of the study. Because we had read many books and shared in weekly discussions throughout the month, I sought to know exactly what was communicated across time, wondering if that might help demonstrate an effect on my child's developing awareness of race and racial issues. Figure 5 provides a visual summary of 18 key vocabulary words and their frequency relative to one another.

Figure 5

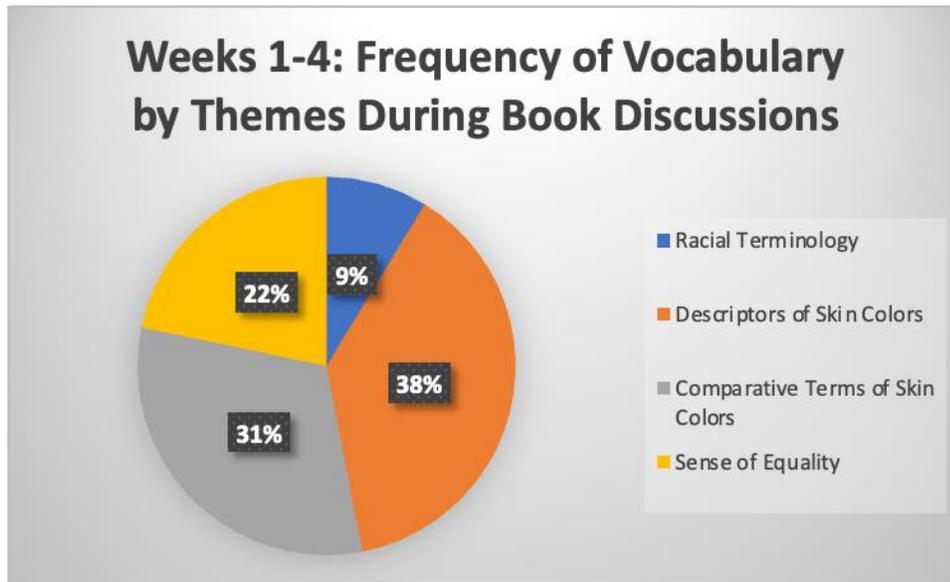
Weeks 1-4: Highest Frequency Vocabulary Words During Book Discussions



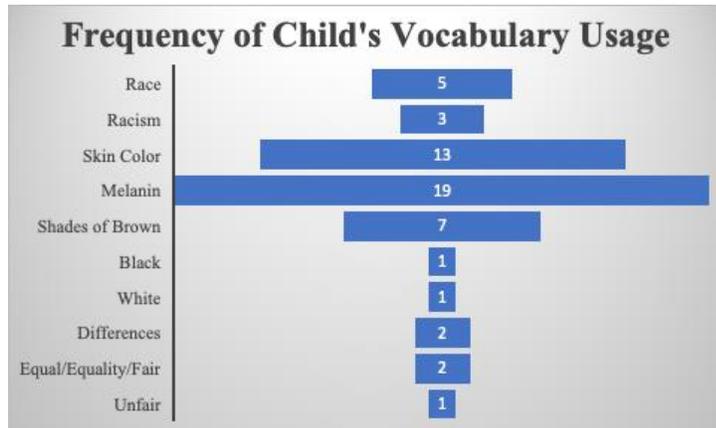
From the clear visual representation of Figure 5, I recognized that several overall themes had emerged. I divided the 18 high-frequency vocabulary words into the following four themes as depicted in Figure 6: Racial Terminology (race, racism, racist), Descriptors of Skin Color (skin color, shades of brown, melanin, black, white), Comparative Terms of Skin Color (darker, lighter, different, similar), and Sense of Equality (equal/equality, unequal, fair, unfair, mean, love). I discovered that 38% of the vocabulary was dedicated to describing skin colors and that 31% of the vocabulary focused on comparisons of skin colors. Together 69% of the vocabulary centered on the concept of skin color, specifically introducing language to understand, name, describe, and compare skin colors. An additional 9% of the vocabulary provided clear language to name racial terminology in developing awareness about race and racism. Finally, 22% of the time, the vocabulary addressed issues surrounding equality and inequality.

Figure 6

Weeks 1-4: Frequency of Vocabulary by Themes During Book Discussions

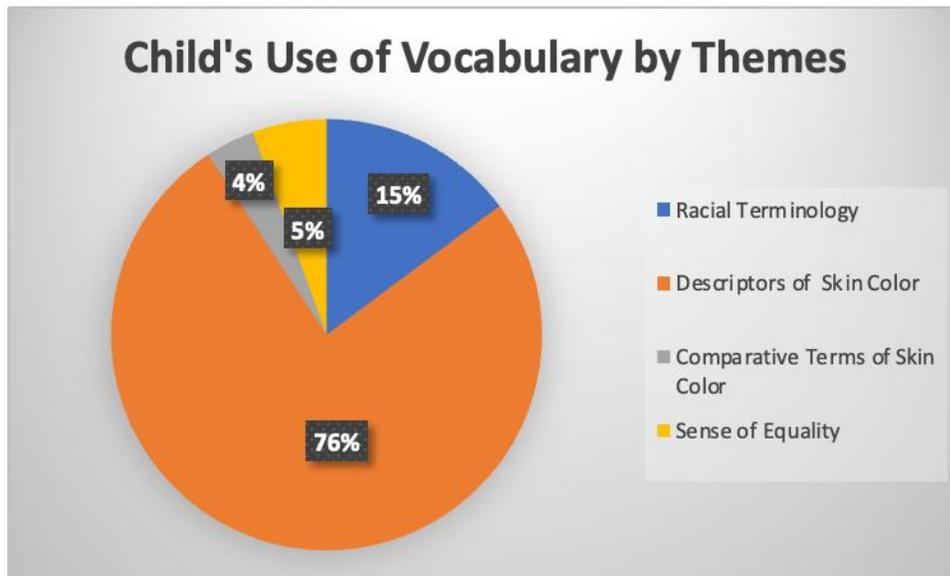


The next step was to cross-study another data source to analyze my daughter's internalization and incorporation of the book readings and discussions. To maintain a running record of my child's use of new vocabulary as it occurred spontaneously throughout the day outside of the shared reading and discussion time, I used a tally sheet for each week of the study. I was curious to learn whether there was a pattern between the vocabulary words we discussed during book readings and her independent use of any of those words as they naturally emerged in her lexicon. Figure 7 displays my child's 10 most frequently used vocabulary words based on their specific word count for the entirety of the four-week study. Immediately I noticed that my daughter's highest vocabulary usage centered on the concept of "colors of skin" with the terms skin color, melanin, and shades of brown being used the most frequently relative to other vocabulary. The racial terminology of race and racism were the next most frequent, while issues of equality and inequality appeared the least frequently in her vocabulary usage.

Figure 7*Frequency of Child's Vocabulary Usage*

Next, I sorted my daughter's use of vocabulary into themes just as I had done with the previous set of data taken from book readings and discussions. My aim was to analyze her vocabulary usage over time to discover the emergence of any themes as she developed her awareness of race and racial issues. Using the same four themes as before, I distributed the 10 most frequent vocabulary terms as follows: Racial Terminology (race, racism), Descriptors of Skin Color (skin color, melanin, shades of brown, black, white), Comparative Terms of Skin Color (differences), and Sense of Equality (equal/equality/fair, unfair). 80% of her vocabulary use centered on skin color: 76% of the language described skin color and 4% compared skin color. Another 15% of her vocabulary use focused on a sense of equality with language around fairness and unfairness. Finally, 5% of her vocabulary used the words race and racism associated with the theme of racial terminology.

Figure 8*Child's Use of Vocabulary by Themes*



My investigation led me to wonder if the high-frequency language of the book readings and discussions had any signs of paralleling my daughter's own use of high-frequency language as represented thematically. I compared Figures 4 and 8 directly to determine any similarities or differences. I discovered that in both instances, most of the language use focused on describing and comparing skin colors with 69% and 80% respectively. While only 9% of the book readings and discussions centered on racial terminology, 15% of my daughter's language did so, a significant increase. And finally, although 22% of the book readings and discussions used vocabulary relating to a sense of equality, only 5% of my daughter's vocabulary represented themes of equality. I began to see a pattern taking shape, a possible reflection of the vocabulary shared during book readings and discussions on my child's use of vocabulary as she was developing awareness of race and racial issues.

To further understand my child's experience during this study, I wished to include and analyze my daughter's impressions of the readings and activities from her own perspective. As previously described, I read an antiracist children's book with my daughter each Monday during

the month of January 2022, and we shared a discussion about the book during the reading. Then, throughout the remainder of the week, I observed and recorded her use of language as it occurred spontaneously. It turned out that another data collection source – weekly field notes and narratives- proved to be insightful as well. Much like the weekly tally sheet of vocabulary usage, the weekly field notes and narratives created a window of opportunity to listen and observe for moments of spontaneous self-expression related to ways in which my daughter might be processing new themes and concepts from the shared readings and book discussions. The aim was to try to capture her internal construction of meaning and understanding through another data lens so that I could more fully analyze her account of the overall experience while remaining as objective as possible as the parent-researcher. By observing and recording my daughter's own words via her questions and comments, I had the opportunity to witness her construction of meaning as she encountered and integrated new information and perspectives.

During the first week of January 2022, my daughter repeatedly encouraged other family members to read the book from our study as well, frequently requesting, "Can you read this to me?" I observed that she carried the book with her wherever she went throughout the home and that she wanted to ensure that each family member – parents and siblings - had the chance to read and re-read it. She said that it was a "very important book" and "I think you should read this book, too." She demonstrated strong excitement and enthusiasm for the book, evidently finding inherent value in its importance and wanting to share the message with other family members, extending the book's audience beyond the scope of my original work with her individually. The involvement of others and the repetition of its reading was clearly important to her as she processed new information and worked to integrate new concepts.

In contrast to week one, the second week's book selection was more scientific and fact-based, and there were colorful photographs of children rather than artistic illustrations. My daughter expressed pleasure in the strong visual appeal of the book's realistic representation of children, and she also associated well with the clear and precise vocabulary. While the book focused on the racial differences of humans in terms of skin color, my daughter began to extend her curiosity about race to other subjects as well. For example, my daughter wondered aloud, "Do eyes and hair have melanin? Is that what gives them different color?" In another instance of her growing curiosity, one morning while playing with our dog, she asked, "Do animals have melanin, too?" She seemed to be grappling with her new racial awareness and seeking to expand its application beyond humans to other animal subjects, beginning with the family pet.

Week three of the book study yielded fewer results and findings than previously. While my daughter appeared content to look through the books at her leisure during the week, there was a noticeable lack of deeper interaction with them than in the weeks beforehand. She did not ask anyone else in the family to read the books to her, nor did she mention them to anyone. Instead, they remained in her homeschool learning space throughout the week rather than circulating to other areas of the home. As reflected in her vocabulary tally sheet from that week, she mentioned "skin color" and "shades of brown" eight times in total, but otherwise, there was no data to collect in the forms of field notes and narratives.

During the fourth and final week of the study, my daughter seemed more energized and invigorated about the book choice again. With a biography of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as the subject matter, she was able to demonstrate comprehension and concern for concepts of equality and justice. While the previous books had focused on the more tangible, visible, and concrete issues of race and introduced the concept of racism, this text moved into the more abstract realm

of racial justice. She expressed sadness for the character of Martin Luther King, Jr. as a young boy because of "how he is treated because of the color of his skin." She didn't think it was "right to separate him from his (white childhood) friend when they started school." My daughter also communicated that she felt upset that "(white) shop owners wouldn't allow any other skin colors." Her thoughts, as communicated through her statements, expressed a growing awareness of a sense of injustice around more complex social issues such as racism and racial segregation.

It should be noted that at this time my daughter's weekly coloring and storytelling follow-up activities did not provide adequate data to exemplify her developing racial awareness. Additionally, the weekly attitude scales did not reveal enough significant variation to yield analyzable results. For this paper, I chose to omit those data sources in my analysis.

Action Plan

In this final section, I will discuss various ways in which I plan to apply further efforts to improve and extend this action research study. I have made careful analysis of the data acquired at this time, and the work has inspired me to carry my investigation forward to gain an even deeper understanding of my child's developing awareness of race and racial issues. My hope is that this body of research will contribute valuable insight into antiracist education during early childhood as part of a growing social justice movement overall in the field of education.

Conclusions

This action research project investigated the effect of antiracist children's literature on a white, homeschooled, 5-year-old child's developing awareness of race and racial issues. The impetus for this study initially centered on my own growing consciousness about the importance of explicit antiracist education as well as my desire to create a strong foundation of social justice education for my daughter beginning at a young age. Those factors, combined with a lack of

racial diversity in my community, led me to consider the use of antiracist children's literature as a conduit for initiating critical conversations around race and racial issues. I felt encouraged to begin this work during her early childhood years rather than waiting for a supposedly more opportune time when she was older. On the contrary, I was highly motivated to initiate this study sooner rather than later, and I hoped to contribute in some small way to ensuring a more just and equitable world, in alignment with my deeply held personal and professional values of peace and social justice education.

In reviewing the literature surrounding the topic of early childhood antiracist education, I discovered that there is indeed a growing movement in social justice education to include early childhood in its scope. Furthermore, there is also evidence to support the effectiveness of multicultural literacy as a tangible, hands-on conduit for introducing and initiating important conversations centered on social justice education. Under the guidance of committed educators, who themselves must endeavor to confront their own inherent biases and prejudices as part of their preparation, young children are developmentally equipped to carry out this work. During early childhood, young children are actively observing and constructing meaning of the world around them including making sense of their social environments. By selecting high quality and diverse books, educators can proactively develop culturally sustaining classrooms that promote a burgeoning awareness of social justice issues. Though the use of multicultural books and the shared experience of reading and discussing them together, young children engage in lessons and develop awareness and language around complex subject matter, including race and racial issues, in a way that is age-appropriate and developmentally suitable. In this way, it is possible to destigmatize and normalize critical conversations around race and racism beginning as soon as early childhood.

Overall, the findings of my action research project supported the existing literature and demonstrated that there are positive outcomes to scaffolding a young child's growing awareness of race and racial issues with antiracist children's literature. Using both qualitative and quantitative data collection tools, I gathered evidence to notate my daughter's use of vocabulary words taken from the books that we read together over the 4-week period of the study. I also recorded her questions and comments outside of the lessons to capture her ongoing construction of meaning during this time.

After analyzing the data, I discovered a strong parallel between the high-frequency vocabulary shared during book readings and discussions with my daughter's own use of the vocabulary during her independent time. This pattern was possibly a reflection of her developing awareness of race and racial issues, based on the conversations we had during the practice of shared reading. Another interesting discovery that emerged was that most of my daughter's language focused on the theme of skin color. The next most frequent language use was based on the theme of racial terminology. Finally, the theme of racial equality was the least common theme in her language use. This data might suggest that my white, 5-year-old child's developmental level of awareness was more heavily focused on the concrete aspects of race (skin color) rather than the more abstract concepts of racial issues (equality).

Recommendations

Going forward, I strongly believe that the work of social justice education – in this case antiracist education – should be included in the realm of early childhood education. The Montessori imperative to “follow the child” can be expanded to incorporate the young child's developing awareness of social constructs and environments, including race and racial issues. Through the guidance of aware and informed adults, who have conducted their own preparation

to undertake this work, and by allowing antiracist children's literature to work as a conduit, children are developmentally capable of sharing in critical conversations on difficult topics. Building a child's familiarity and comfort with new concepts and perspectives sets the stage to move from concrete understandings of race to more abstract understandings of racial issues. My own 5-year-old's daughter's developing awareness of race and racial issues is testimony to the potential of all children to respond to antiracist children's literature in a similar fashion.

My next cycle of action research would be to expand this study into other learning environments to obtain more data for analysis. For example, it would be interesting to try to determine if the results of my study were specific to my racial positionality as a white educator and white mother of a white child. In other words, might differing racial groups (of both educators, parents, and children) experience similar or different effects of antiracist children's literature on developing awareness of race and racial issues in early childhood? While my research offers one, unique perspective, I would like to learn more about the experiences of other groups of educators in more educational environments, beyond a homeschool setting alone. A similar line of research could also be carried out across a wide array of homes working with many groups of parents. I imagine the data would be rich and varied, allowing for more insights and discoveries into the process of developing racial awareness in early childhood.

My suggestion for other educators as well as parents is to consider the potential positive outcomes of this shared endeavor - not only to transform themselves and their children but also their learning spaces and homes - as a pathway that lays the foundation for the critical conversations that we must face as a society as we address vital social justice issues. Rather than shying away from our discomfort or lack of know-how, we can instead embrace the challenge and explicitly confront our unease and biases. If we are to guide children and prepare them for

the future world which they will inherit then it is our duty to lean into antiracist social justice work alongside them, destigmatizing and normalizing the experience of critical racial conversations.

My sincere hope is that this action research project will inspire others to establish an environment of collaboration with young children through shared reading and discussion of antiracist children's literature. The opportunity to witness a young child's developing awareness of race and racial issues is no small wonder. This study provides hope and inspiration that we indeed can achieve a more just and equitable world even with one child and one book at a time!

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Appendix A

Antiracist Children's Literature Selection

Week 1:

The Skin I'm In: A First Look at Racism by Pat Thomas

ISBN 978-0-7641-2459-4

Week 2:

All the Colors We Are: The Story of How We Get Our Skin Color by Katie Kissinger

ISBN 978-1-60554-079-5

Week 3:

Hair Like Mine by LaTashia M. Perry
ISBN 978-0-9862379-7-3

Skin Like Mine by LaTashia M. Perry
ISBN 978-0-9971579-8-7

Week 4:

My Little Golden Book About Martin Luther King Jr. by Bonnie Bader
ISBN 978-0-525-57870-3

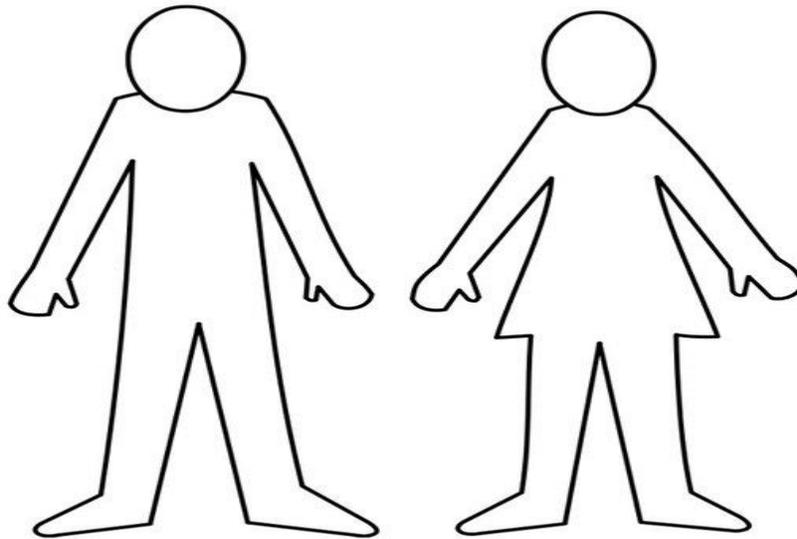
Appendix B

Child's Coloring and Dictation

Child's Weekly Coloring & Story Dictation:

Date:

Book Title:



Child's Story Dictation:

Appendix C
Researcher's Journal

Researcher's Journal

Date & Time:

Location:

External Factors:

- How are you feeling overall about today's book reading/discussion?
- What do you think went well with today's book reading/discussion?
- What could you improve for the next book reading/discussion?

Thoughts, Ideas, Questions, Concerns, Observations:

Appendix D

Field Notes and Narratives

Weekly Field Notes & Narratives

Week of:

Book Title:

Date & Time:

Location:

External Factors:

Observations:

Narratives:

Date & Time:

Location:

External Factors:

Observations:

Narratives:

Date & Time:

Location:

External Factors:

Observations:

Narratives:

Date & Time:

Location:

External Factors:

Observations:

Narratives:

Appendix E

Tally Sheet of Child’s Vocabulary

Weekly Tally Sheet

Week of:

Book Title:

Date:

New Vocabulary:

Use of Vocabulary:

Vocabulary Word 1

Vocabulary Word 2

Vocabulary Word 3

Vocabulary Word 4

Vocabulary Word 5

Vocabulary Word 6

Vocabulary Word 7

Vocabulary Word 8

Vocabulary Word 9

Vocabulary Word 10

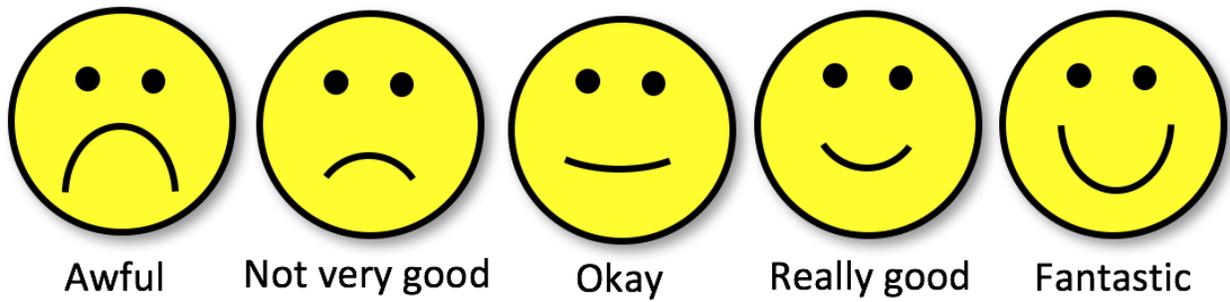
Appendix F
Child's Attitude Scale

Name:

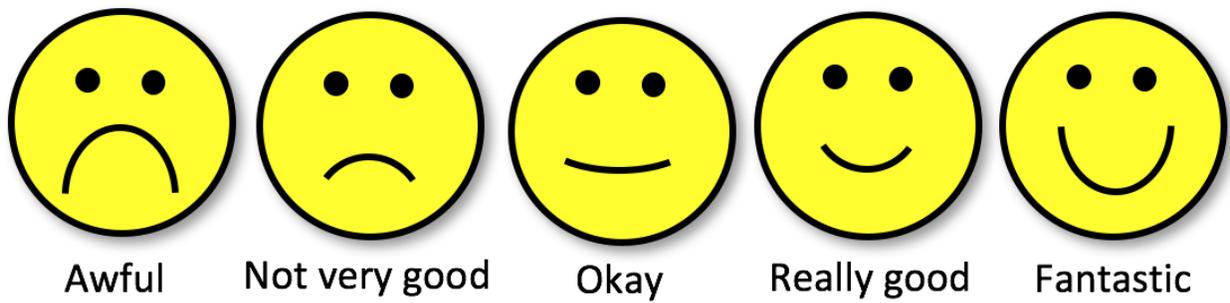
Date:

Book Title:

How do you feel overall about the book we read together this week?



How do you feel about the characters in the story?



How do you feel about coloring and telling stories after we read the book?

